A Timely Voice: Garth Boomer on Literature

Wayne Sawyer
University of Western Sydney

Abstract: In the conceptual triumvirate of language, literacy and literature that have been central to thinking about English curriculum – indeed, are the overarching organisers for the Australian Curriculum: English – that which received possibly the least attention from Garth Boomer was literature. This paper attempts to pull together Boomer’s writings on literature, which, with the exceptions considered here, are largely contained in broader essays (often on language or literacy) as sub-sections, brief ideas or seemingly throw-away phrases ripe with implication. This piece will consider Boomer’s writings on literature both in his time and in the context of current issues around the teaching of literature. His own themed school-texts of the 70s and 80s will also be examined in the light of these writing.

English teachers have always thought of their subject in terms that gave prominence to language, literacy and literature. Whatever problems have been created by separating these entities into strands in the Australian Curriculum, the concepts – although certainly not the only way of thinking about English – have an unproblematic place in the history of the subject. Green (1990) sees these as three historical ‘categories’ around which the ‘ideological formation’ of ‘English’ has been organised. That is why it so surprising when one turns to the work of Garth Boomer, to find so little of his writing that directly addresses literature. Search any database, for example, for Garth Boomer and a plethora of titles including the words language and literacy (and learning – his own triad) appear, but very little on literature. Certainly if there is one key characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s – the period with which I will be mainly dealing here – it is that if the term English was used almost interchangeably with any of the three terms i.e. ‘language’, ‘literacy’, ‘literature’), it was language. As one example, the 1971 Syllabus in English in NSW for Forms 1-IV defined the subject in these terms:

1. The aim of English is to develop in pupils the utmost personal competence in using the language.
2. … The competence sought is not some aggregate of separate skills, but the ability to deal with a range of language situations …
… English in Forms I–IV is not concerned with form without meaning, or with values that are not established by consideration of the actual language used. (NSWSSB, 1971, p. 4)

James Britton’s Language and Learning (1970) became a key reference point in the 1970s, while John Dixon’s chapter on the skills that English is to engender in his seminal Growth through English is entitled ‘Processes in language learning’ (Dixon, 1967/1975, Ch. 2).

None of this is to say that literature was reduced in importance. Quite the opposite was true in the NSW Syllabus quoted above, for example, where, of the four contexts of language development (literature, media, personal expression and everyday communication), literature was pre-eminent:

No apology is made for the special prominence given to literature, as drawing together the threads and concerns of English in a particularly fruitful way. (NSWSSB, ndA, p. 7)

Of all the ‘contexts’ of English, none is more important than literature. (NSWSSB, ndB, p. 1)

The sheer ‘given’ nature of the absolute centrality of literature to English might explain Boomer’s relative ‘quietness’ about the topic. In any case, this paper will attempt to pull together Boomer’s writings on literature. Some of these are contained in broader essays (usually on language or literacy or learning, or combinations of these) as sub-sections, brief ideas or seemingly throw-away phrases, often ripe with implication. However, I will focus here mainly – but not exclusively – on three essays in which Boomer did address literature directly.

The first essay is entitled ‘Eternal Triangles: Language as Literature in Senior English’, published in the NSW English Teachers Association journal in 1974, and more lately reproduced as part of that ETA’s 50th anniversary edition of its current journal, mETAphor. The second, ‘Literature and English Teaching: Opening Up the Territory’, was written before an international seminar on Language, Schooling and Society held in East Lansing, Michigan, in November, 1984. Boomer’s paper was produced for this first seminar held under the new title for the international umbrella English teaching association, The International Federation
for the Teaching of English (IFTE). Boomer was to chair the ‘Study Group’ on ‘Language, Literature and Human Values’ and his essay was a working paper distributed to the group prior to the seminar. The third piece is strictly not by Boomer alone; it is the report of the Study Group which Boomer chaired at the East Lansing seminar, but can be assumed, in parts, to strongly reflect Boomer’s thinking. It is published in the proceedings of the seminar (Tchudi, 1985). The Study Group on ‘Language, Literature and Human Values’ consisted of a number of important names in English teaching, including Louise Rosenblatt. Even in these three essays, however, Boomer’s writing on literature is often mainly suggestive, rather than elaborated. Boomer also co-authored a number of classroom coursebooks which included literature as ‘stimulus’ material.

Before turning to Boomer directly, I will present a brief discussion of some of the context of Australian secondary literature teaching in the 1970s and 1980s. In opening the discussion with this contextual material, I will on occasions make specific reference to documents, such as Syllabi, located specifically in NSW. This is not to suggest that what occurred in NSW in that period was in any sense ‘typical’ of Australia. Those references are simply meant to give a sense about how one large jurisdiction was designing a literature curriculum, and therefore of some of the national context in which Boomer was operating. Further, in looking at material such as coursebooks or material on literature teaching published by professional associations, I will often focus on one selected year – 1977 – the year in which the NSW English Teachers’ Association published an important and comprehensive text which does, I believe, give insight into many of the characteristic concerns of the time. I choose one year because of its potential for giving some small measure of depth, even in an article of this length. In choosing one year and one state for some of the contextual discussion, I, of course, present a very partial picture of the situation in Australia. Important overviews such as Schoenheimer (1972), coursebooks such as that by Delves and Tickell (1970), or important curriculum work in Victoria and elsewhere, for example, are not presented. Largely what is provided here is an account of the context in which I worked and from which I read Boomer at the time (as it happens, 1977 is also the year in which I began teaching). There may even remain some of this in the perspective from which I re-read him now.

Aspects of literature teaching from the 1970s to the mid-1980s

In the 1970s, the ‘Growth’ model of English (Dixon, 1967) became widely influential in Australia. In NSW, the Forms I-IV Syllabus published in 1971 and referred to earlier, was, and still is, widely regarded as typifying ‘Growth’ approaches to English (see Homer, 1973, p. 212; Brock, 1993, p. 30; Davis & Watson, 1990, p. 159; Watson, 1994, p. 40; Sawyer, 2008). The place which literature held in the ‘Growth’ model itself vis-a-vis Dixon’s Growth through English was, and remains, highly contested (for details, see Sawyer (2010)). However, as I have shown, this NSW version of ‘Growth’ highlighted literature as the most important ‘context’ in which the English classroom aimed to develop in students ‘the utmost personal competence in using the language’ (NSWSSB, 1971, p. 4). Literature received by far the longest section of discussion and detail in the Syllabus (NSWSSB, 1971, p. 13–14). The approach to language that was to be taken in each Syllabus ‘context’, including the ‘context’ literature, was a focus on usage, vocabulary, structure and style (NSWSSB, 1971). Classroom response to literature was to focus on ‘the form of a work, its structure and style; its parts and their relations to one another and the whole’ (NSWSSB, 1971, p. 13).

In 1977, English in Secondary Schools: Today and Tomorrow (Watson & Eagleson, 1977) was published by the NSW English Teachers’ Association. This important text contains a debate over ‘literature-centred’/‘language-centred’ approaches to English – a common debate of the time, and, indeed, one with a respectably long history in English curriculum theorising (Sawyer, 2009). Yet what emerges from English in Secondary Schools – and also from a study of the broader professional literature of the same year, specifically of the journals English in Australia, The Teaching of English, and the NSW English Teachers’ Association Newsletter – is a view of literature firmly based in language study. The Leavisite ‘preachers of culture’ (Mathieson, 1975) approach to literature is not largely prominent in these debates. Kramer (1977), for example, saw literature as providing a focus for language study, while Homer (1977) argued for an approach to literature in terms of Hallidayan sociolinguistic study. In fact, it was very common for the ‘literature-centred’ side of these debates to focus on the integration of language and literature. Case (1977) advocates language-based close study of poetry and English in Secondary schools contains five pages of teaching ideas based on the integration of
language and literature in popular novels of the time (Harkin & Carleberg, 1977), while Eagleson (1977a) discusses a role for literature in student investigations of language in use. Thus literature in these debates is not conceptualised in terms of ‘cultural heritage’ or ‘mission’, but primarily as a linguistic enterprise. Indeed, I would argue that it had been conceptualised as such by Dixon himself, who saw linguistics as central to the study of literature (Dixon, 1975, pp. 79–80). Prominently advocated approaches to the teaching of literature in secondary schools in 1977 included: class and group discussion; improvisation and dramatic re-enactment; the validating of personal response, especially through writing; and imaginative re-creation activities in the manner of Stratta et al. (1973) (Christie, 1977; Tucker, 1977; Carroll et al., 1977; Williams, G., 1977; Ward, 1977; Johnson, 1977).

A final point about the 1970s is to do with the coursebooks of the period for classroom work. By ‘coursebooks’, I am referring to those books (and resource kits) produced for in-class use by students. In 1977, there were eight coursebooks both published in Australia and reviewed in at least one of the journals, English in Australia, The Teaching of English, or the NSW English Teachers’ Association Newsletter. These were a mix of:

- a direct focus on language in use in society (Burton et al., 1977; Eagleson, 1977b; Hoffman, 1977)
- largely grammatical exercises on units of language – such as correcting or copying sentence structures (Hansen, 1977; Sadler et al., 1977; Sadler & Young, 1977)
- stimulus materials focused on themes as the basis of writing, discussion etc. (Field et al., 1977; Walters & Allen, 1977)

Though a mixed collection, it was the last group on this list that often received attention from literature-centred advocates (see below) in the 70s. The flagship of coursebooks based on ‘Growth’ principles had, of course, been 1963’s Reflections, developed by Simon Clements, John Dixon and Leslie Stratta while teaching together at Walworth Comprehensive School in South London (see West (1998)). While possibly many aspects of Reflections were taken up in later coursebooks, it was the thematic organisation of some of these of the period that drew objections in Australia. Thematic organisation was a manifestation of another aspect of ‘Growth’ curriculum and pedagogy: the integrated unit. Integrated units – rather than isolated and fragmented work on different aspects of English (poetry on Monday, spelling on Tuesday, etc.) – were fundamental to ‘Growth’ as represented by Dixon (1975, pp. 32–33), and were strongly encouraged in the NSW Syllabus (NSWSSB, 1971, pp. 2–3). Thematic unit organisation, though – often reflected in these coursebooks – was largely opposed by the ‘literature-centred’ school in Australia. The argument was that the study of literature and a focus on language-in-literature was debased by thematic work, which did not treat literature-as-linguistic-artefact (see, for example, Homer, 1977; Packer, 1977 and Kramer, 1977). In the relevant coursebooks, literary works (often through extracts) provided a perspective on the relevant theme. Literary texts constituted voices raising issues on aspects of the central theme. Smith (1977) argued that literature gave English its distinctive identity and literary texts ought not be relegated to simply providing other perspectives on a theme. The place of literature in these thematic approaches can be distinguished from an approach which examined how texts might represent a theme, and the ways in which such representations could shape understanding of the theme (e.g. Gold & Michaels, 2006, pp. 12–13). One might think of this as the difference between literature-as-ideas and literature-as-linguistic-artefact.

As I have said, the approach to literature which critics like Smith, Kramer and Packer deplored was not the approach we see the 1971 NSW Syllabus (nor, I would argue, was it even Dixon’s position). As the eight coursebooks listed above show, approaches in Australia were not uniform. To the extent that some coursebooks were operating as the ‘literature-centred’ critics claimed, such books can be seen as representing the triumph of ‘integration’ over other aspects of ‘Growth’.

Boomer himself co-wrote a coursebook series in the early 70s (Boomer & Hood, 1970, 1972, 1973), each thematically organised. He also compiled a poetry anthology (Boomer & McFarlane, 1975) and a book of photographs as stimulus for student creation (Boomer, 1971). His coursebooks typified the thematic profile discussed above. A unit on ‘Relationships’, for example, in The Runaway Sun (Boomer & Hood 1972, pp. 22–40) begins with an extract from ‘The Ancient Mariner’ as an introduction to the theme, followed by an extract from Agnar Mykle’s ‘The Hotel Room’. Students are asked to describe the main character’s state of mind in the Mykle extract and relate it to the colour grey. Loneliness has already been introduced through the
Coleridge extract and students asked to choose a ‘lonely colour’. They are then also asked to think about the thoughts of a mountain climber, a glider pilot and a surfer before an extract on surfing from a popular surfing magazine of the day. These issues could be assumed to be the basis of either class or group discussion, but this is not specified. An extract on Old Candy, the character from Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men, is preceded by a question on losing a family pet and followed by a series of questions on the Steinbeck extract (‘Looking Back’) that focus largely on feelings displayed in the Steinbeck extract and another series of questions (‘Looking Deeper’) which ask students to consider style, as well as discussing the rightness or wrongness of the characters’ actions. Students are then asked to compose a piece of ‘imaginative re-creation’.

The rest of the chapter proceeds in this way, though with later specific foci on: ‘Talking Points’, ‘Writing’ and ‘Writing Workshop’. ‘Writing’ asks students to write about related themes so far – some based on their own lives (‘Write in poetry or prose about the time when a pet died in your house’) – and ‘Writing Workshop’ contains a series of activities focused on dialogue and register. All chapters end with recommendations for wide reading. Largely, this work corresponds in its use of literature-as-stimulus-material to the notion of literature-as-ideas, to the relative neglect of literature-as-linguistic-artefact. It is certainly of its time, keeping in mind, of course, that teachers might use such books in a number of ways. Boomer himself strongly argued that pedagogy was what made the difference in any area of English or in any approach to literature succeeding or failing: ‘there is nothing either good or bad but teaching makes it so’ (Boomer, 1977, p. 6).

A new Syllabus was introduced in NSW in 1987, again arguing that literature ‘provides a unique context for language growth through expansion of the student’s individual world’ (NSWBSSE, 1987, p. 45). If that Syllabus is any guide, during the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, ‘imaginative re-creation’ (Stratta et al., 1973) had become a characteristic set of practices in responding to literature in secondary classrooms. The specific practices recommended in that Syllabus included: rewriting scenes from a different point of view; scripting episodes from a text for radio or television; writing an alternative ending to a text; rewriting an incident as a newspaper report; writing the diary entries of a literary character, and improvising scenes for live performance (NSWBSSE, 1987, p. 48). It was not unusual at the time for teaching resources on literature pedagogy to focus strongly on imaginative re-creation (e.g., Benton & Fox, 1985; Watson, 1980; Wilcock, 1986). In the mid-80s, coursebooks such as the English Workshop series (Forrestal & Reid, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986) or the English in Units series (Haywood & Bernhardt, 1986, 1987) moved away from simply theme-based units of work. Whole units were focused on texts (e.g. To Kill a Mockingbird, Wind in the Willows), or features of texts (point of view, translations, irony), on specific aspects of social language-in-use (e.g. register, oral language), on student products (play-writing, autobiography), on reading across texts in different ways, on genre (sci-fi, crime stories), on the craft of writing (creating suspense) and on skills (punctuation). There were only a small number of thematic units in such series. Units were focused and consciously worked on textuality and language development: the English Workshop series contained a four-year scope and sequence chart arranged around Reading (and Viewing), Writing, Talking (and Listening), and Literary and Language Concepts.

Boomer himself again co-wrote a pair of coursebooks in the early 80s (Boomer & Davis, 1980, 1981). Once again, these books echoed the trends just discussed. The focus was on Australian literature, mostly through extracts. There were fewer chapters compared to his 1970s texts and the focus of each was not simply thematic, but quite strongly on textuality. As a point of comparison with The Runaway Sun discussed previously, Reading and Writing, Book One also had a chapter on ‘Values and Relationships’ (Boomer & Davis, 1980, pp. 147–186). This did not focus on themes such as loneliness or loss, as did the earlier coursebook, but on aspects of textuality. Focusing questions included, ‘How do authors convey values in their stories?’ ‘How do the values of readers affect the way they read?’ ‘What makes a good reader and writer?’ Students were guided through chapters carefully with: focusing activities preceding reading; note-making and sharing responses after reading; re-reading to discuss aspects of language and structure, and detailed suggestions about how to approach answering those focusing questions. There is a long opening section to the book dealing with how groups can function most usefully in responding to the texts and on keeping a reading journal. Chapter titles emphasise not ‘themes’, but aspects of texts (e.g. stereotypes), genres (biography, science fiction) or processes (reading between the lines, telling stories, theories (on reading and writing)).

Before leaving the 1980s, note needs to be taken of
Ian Reid’s *The Making of Literature*, published by AATE in 1984. Reid’s text importantly discussed textual framing and texts-as-transactions based on models of exchange. Above all, however, Reid drew his well-known distinction between ‘Gallery’ and ‘Workshop’ models of working with literature. The ‘Gallery’ is where literature is held up to be admired as cultural treasure. The ‘Workshop’ is where literature is made and canonical (and non-canonical) literature is used as the basis of students’ own ‘making’ – as a source for further inventiveness and experiments in artifice, as well as for the integration of language and literature and of reading and writing.

Against this background, then, I now turn to a thematic discussion of Boomer’s work on literature, focusing centrally on the three essays highlighted earlier. Any historical discussion of the place of literature in Boomer’s thinking needs to begin with his views on why literature ought to be studied, and also just what the term ‘literature’ refers to.

**Why literature?**

In the 1974 essay, ‘Eternal Triangles …’, Boomer rejects any argument about moral improvement as justifying the study of literature. Boomer argues for the value of literature as residing in ‘perspective’ – ‘fresh perspectives’, ‘alternative realities’, ‘life under multiple forms’. In the tradition of Dixon and ‘Growth’, Boomer rejects the ‘cultural heritage’ model as based on a static notion of literature which idealises the past, ‘smacks of the handing down of “truth”’ and assumes a passive reader (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 41). He was soon after to write about the contributions of Suzanne Langer, Britton and Harding as showing the importance of the handing down of “truth” and assumes a passive reader (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 41). He was soon after to write about the contributions of Suzanne Langer, Britton and Harding as showing the importance of literature in ‘ordering the self’ and ‘to understand self and society’ (Boomer, 1977, p. 2, 14). Already, in 1974, Boomer was arguing that literature's role is both social and critical – not to ‘find culture’, but to help us ‘forge a new culture’ (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 41). In his 1977 essay, he returned to the theme: education brings about ‘cultural literacy … through the reading and making of literature … knowing oneself and the world’ (Boomer, 1977, p. 14). In the future, ‘[t]he searchlight of literature will play over the myths of contemporary society’, he says, ‘and the past will be brought into dialogue with the present’. The English teacher will be ‘free to pursue the quest for cultural literacy through literature’ (Boomer, 1977, p. 15; see also Boomer, 1980/1988, pp. 48ff). Literature ought to be subversive and to ‘challenge’ present culture, to advance what Frye calls ‘preposterous thinking’. Part of Boomer’s argument, then, relies on the value of literature-as-ideas. Literature is defined by form and he argues (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 42) for the value of the aesthetic experience as ‘form’, but the drive in this essay is towards literature having its ultimate value as ideas.

He was to return to this theme also. In the 1984 essay, Boomer began by placing the study of literature within a larger context of the ‘struggle’ (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 99) for a democratic curriculum in Australia. Literature has its place in this struggle because in Australia, ‘diversity’ is a driver of curriculum debate and literature can be a key site of thinking about diversity. The ‘democratic’ question for literature was literature’s place vis-à-vis 1980s calls for a common curriculum. One question is what constitutes the ‘culturally significant and “rich”’ (he quotes Bruner’s argument that schools should deal with ‘culturally significant media’). Another is whether literature could constitute a socially unifying force, or whether it actually might represent ‘the colonising powers of a dominant culture’ (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 100). Again, Boomer sees the ‘transforming power’ of literature in the ‘culturically important content and issues’ with which it deals.

The East Lansing Study Group in the 1985 essay saw the value of literature as enabling students to become ‘more self aware; more sensitive to both the uniqueness of the individual and the shared culture … more knowledgeable about the ongoing cultural dialogue directed towards great issues which shape people and which they in turn shape’ (Boomer, 1985, p. 169). This captures both the notion of literature-as-ideas and as offering the means to challenge present culture and shape future cultures.

**Questions of definition**

In 1974, Boomer defined literature in terms of the form with which the artist imposes a pattern on experience (‘the world ordered and patterned … stylised and simplified’ – Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 39) and he quotes Roland Barthes on literature being the only form of communication in which ‘the language deliberately invites attention to itself’ (p. 38) – a definition also used contemporaneously by Britton (1970) to define his ‘spectator role’, and later, in Australia by Misson and Morgan (2006, p. 36) to define the ‘aesthetic’ text. Boomer, in fact, links the making of literary form to any everyday play with language, just as Britton himself does with the notion of the spectator role.
In the classroom, Boomer argued for balancing our respect for the canon with the need for broader options and challenges for students.

Dixon had controversially defined ‘literature’ in *Growth through English* so that students’ own work was to be included in the definition (Dixon, 1975, p. 55). This was a major source of the contemporaneous critique levelled at Dixon (Whitehead, 1976; Hansen, 1979; Allen, 1980). Boomer also approaches this definition question in 1984 in terms of inclusivity. For Boomer, a key reference point in defining classroom literature is to do with ‘storying’. This is because literature functions in society as a means of making sense of the world within a form that is ‘aesthetically pleasing’ (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 101). He argues for a breadth of definition that can include: oral storytelling, street theatre, popular novels, films and ‘video plays’ (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 102), and again he relies on Britton’s notion of the ‘spectator role’ (1984/1988, p. 101). Indeed, he had earlier asserted Britton’s belief that ‘it is the function of literature which is crucial to humanity’ (Boomer, 1977, p. 9). Nevertheless, here, in 1984, he does not want to reject the notion that ‘some works [are] richer in potential to help [students] read themselves and the world with greater subtlety’ (p. 102). Indeed, the canon may have greater ‘emancipatory power’ for students than other texts. For Boomer, discussing issues of canonicity with students can itself be curriculum content: how we divide the curriculum between ‘richer’ and lesser’ works; the issue of who arbitrates richness and whether all texts are suitable for all students. Importantly, he asks if the range of texts is indeed widened, then will ‘English’ disappear? Is the canon the defining characteristic of the subject? Whether English is defined by canonical literature and whether it will disappear without this centre has, of course, remained a – perhaps the – central debate in the field. Boomer ends his 1984 essay by entering the debate over ‘English’/’cultural studies’:

I suspect that we are moving to a new era when the term ‘English’ will have to go. My view is that the umbrella ‘cultural studies’ may more properly represent what we are offering to the curriculum. We are indeed about reading and making the world through reading and writing literature, broadly defined. Aren’t we? (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 107)

**Literature as social and as conversation**

This theme of literature as a social act was also central to Boomer’s thinking. It is most developed in the earliest of the three central essays, ‘Eternal Triangles …’ (Boomer, 1974/2010). In this essay, Boomer comes closest to a theory of literature pedagogy. In it, he presents a view of literature (and of literature teaching) as essentially rhetorical – literature as a social act. Boomer grounds the social nature of the ‘literary act’ in *conversation* – his key driving concept. From this, he takes the traditional communication triangle of sender-receiver-message and complicates it by overlaying equivalent elements of teaching – teacher and student-as-reader – onto it. The result is a complex web of triangles which take into account writers, readers, the writer’s work, the writer’s self, the writer’s experience, the teacher, the reader, the reader’s world, the reader’s self (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 37). The teacher’s job, argues Boomer, is to ‘stimulate a conversation between reader and writer’ (p. 43) Boomer concluded that essay by quoting George Gushdorf on literature as a conversation which brings ‘the dead back to life’ (1974/2010, p. 43). The model picks up well, in fact, what Reid (1984) was to describe in terms of ‘exchange’. The Study Group paper of 1985 again defined literature as a ‘transaction’ in ‘aesthetic reading’ (the group included Louise Rosenblatt). ‘Literariness’ itself resides in the reader-text transaction, but the Study Group also highlighted the importance of social processes in classrooms, especially of shared, sustained reflection through ongoing dialogue.

One of the stated positions of his model in the 1974 essay is the need for students to experience making literature. Boomer was to link, in 1982, the question of power to student textual production (Boomer, 1982, p. 121), and I now turn to the steps Boomer made in the three central essays towards questions of power.

**From ‘response’ to ‘critical literacy’**

A more overarching frame in which sit notions of ‘conversation’, ‘literature as social act’, and even ‘textual intervention’ is that of ‘response’. The idea of the reader needing to ‘fill out with life both what is said and … what is not said’ – thus making the literary act a ‘chain of conversations’ (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 40) – is linked by Boomer to the work of D.W. Harding and Roland Barthes. Boomer anticipated in 1974 the importance that reader-response theory was to take on in English curriculum by the 1980s. Reader-response theory, particularly the thinking of Rosenblatt and Iser, was to become almost paradigmatic in writing about literature teaching in Australia in the 1980s. 1987 saw the publication of two key texts by Australians based heavily on reader-response
theory: Corcoran and Evans’ *Readers, Texts, Teachers* and Thomson’s *Understanding Teenagers’ Reading*. Ken Watson’s influential *English Teaching in Perspective* was also published by the Open University Press in 1987, and this revised edition included a section on the reader-response theory of Iser and Rosenblatt. Watson was also publishing in the 1980s the *Reading is Response* series through St Clair Press. Marnie O’Neill said of her time as editor of *English in Australia* (1984–1988) that ‘Iser’s work appears to have had a strong influence on the ways in which we constructed the relationship between the reader, the text and the writer’ (O’Neill, 1992, p. 36). Internationally, the Open University Press series *English, Language, and Education*, published *Developing Response to Fiction* (Protherough, 1983) and *Reading and Response* (Hayhoe & Parker, 1990) during this time. Dixon’s own approach to (canonical) literature was one based firmly in response theory (‘There is no short cut … to each pupil learning to read for himself’ – Dixon, 1975, p. 56). Dixon had considered much previous literature teaching being in fact the teaching of literary criticism, because that provided a defined content, in place of attempting an active engagement of the student with the literature itself. Both the 1971 and 1987 NSW Syllabuses previously discussed framed student engagement with literature as ‘response’, with the later Syllabus defining ‘meaning’ as the outcome of ‘an interaction between what is said or written and the person who is listening, reading or observing’ (NSWBSE, 1987, p. 11; see NSWSSB, 1971, pp. 13–14; NSWSSB, ndB, p. 2; NSWBSE, 1987, p. 45).

Response theory also lay behind the South Australian Education Department’s 1983 publication on teaching literature, *A Single Impulse*. Boomer referred explicitly to *A Single Impulse* in arguing in his 1984 paper for the East Lansing conference that Australian teachers needed to afford greater status to student response. (However he also references Bill Green in warning that over-indulgence in ‘engagement’ and ‘response’ may lead to a loss of critical detachment.) Crucial questions to ask of literature pedagogy included: whether some interpretations are more accurate than others and how we might critique responses from students; whether adult-like sophistication is our aim in literature teaching; what it is we value in literary response and how to increase its power for the reader, and, importantly, the issue of encouraging children to ‘read us “against the grain”, to resist and to question’ (Boomer, 1984/1988, pp. 103–104). The Study Group themselves also sought to go beyond ‘response’. They saw the concept as potentially a distraction ‘from a full apprehension of how literature is socially and ideologically constructed in the first place and then re-made in the act of reading’ (Boomer, 1985, p. 174). Most importantly, they argue, we ‘need to develop constructive social criticism in going beyond response to consider action’ (p. 174 – emphasis in original).

These moves beyond ‘response’ potentially lead in the direction of what we came to know as ‘critical literacy’. Boomer’s pre-conference paper to the Group had asked two important questions in this direction: ‘Have we romantically over-valued the disruptive, critical function of literature and under-played its role as a palliative and a subtle instrument of containment and oppression? … Is literature a form of power-play and, if so, do we need deliberately to teach children how to resist it?’ (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 101). Given the issues he raised about canonicity in this same essay, these questions need to be read as questions, rather than implying his final position, but Boomer is venturing into specific intellectual spaces through these essays, and the move to critical literacy is one of these. In 1982, Boomer (1982, p. 121) had anticipated this move when he wrote that ‘[o]ne reads the culture so that one can act upon it and indeed rewrite parts of it’.

In his Introduction to the Proceedings of the East Lansing seminar, convenor and NCTE President, Stephen Tchudi, wrote that ‘empowerment’ was a theme of the conference and one brought to the seminar by Boomer’s group. The Study Group argued that literature itself has been used to ‘control, blinker, diminish and distort human valuing and human intention’ (Boomer, 1985, p. 173), but has also been used in schools in the past to ‘empower’ students. This is not yet about a systematic approach to examining the ideology of texts, or how readers are positioned by them and how students might be ‘empowered’ to accept, resist, or simply put aside textual ideology. But it is a strong nudge in that direction.

Any examination of Boomer’s body of work has to take account of his 1989 essay ‘Literacy: The Epic Challenge beyond Progressivism’. It is in this essay that Boomer effectively argues in his most extended way for a greater critical consciousness to be explicitly foregrounded in classrooms. Though literature is not the explicit concern in ‘The Epic Challenge …’ the earlier report by his 1984 Study Group offers more than a glimpse of the 1989 essay. In a section entitled ‘Indoctrination’, the Study Group report anticipates Boomer’s 1989 essay by arguing the desirability of

33
teachers being open about their own values, so that these too might be critiqued and not imposed, as part of developing students’ ability to read and write their ‘world’. Indeed, Boomer himself had raised this issue for the Study Group by arguing that much of literature teaching is tied up with the teacher’s ‘values’: ‘we teach … what we are’ because of what literature we choose to bring into the classroom (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 104).

In fact, both the notion of literature as ‘social’ and the move towards a critical literacy lead into another aspect of Boomer’s arguments on literature. In the 1974 essay, following from his defining emphasis on the social, Boomer argues that ‘thorough teaching of literature should be based on a deep theoretical understanding of language and a fairly intensive examination of the sociology of literature’ (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 36). In that essay, context is a central concept and, he argues, the artist works within four main contexts: conventions and knowledge of the literature of his/her time; the larger overall cultural context; the context of his/her social class; and the context of the genre in which he/she is working. This argument seems meant to locate those parts of his ‘eternal triangles’ that are to do with the ‘writer’s work’ (pp. 14–15). The cultural production of literature, then, it is implied, becomes a core concern of literary pedagogy. Questions such as these, however, also beg the question of just what sign-systems and meaning-systems are relevant to discussion of the production of ‘culture’ generally – hence a brief mention from Boomer in the 1984 essay of the place of semiotics in English.

In that 1984 essay, one of Boomer’s headings is ‘The making of literature’, consciously picking up the title of Reid’s book. However, it is not the ‘workshopping’ of students’ own writings that Boomer highlights in Reid’s work. Instead, he takes from Reid the overall notion of literature as a phenomenon of cultural production and consumption. The influence of a thinker such as Raymond Williams is also strongly suggested by this move (see Williams, R., 1977). The recognition that literature is socially constructed, culturally and historically conditioned and differentially perceived by readers – what he referred to as the sociology of literature – feeds into the critical perspective to which his thinking on literature was driving. He looks past Reid’s Gallery/Workshop distinction to the idea that text is given authority ‘by a complex complicity of many agents’ (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 100) and from this to a discussion on literature and power.

Where does all of this lead?
The sense of unelaborated suggestiveness that I, at least, gain from this writing is a result, in the cases of the two pieces around the East Lansing conference, of the context, especially of the genre and the audience. The genre of the pre-conference paper one might call ‘provocation’. The sheer number of topics touched on is huge in an 8-page paper (Boomer, 1984/1988) of this length:

- the making of literature
- the boundaries of literature
- the literary text
- literature and pedagogy, or literature and curriculum composition
- literary response
- literature and values
- literature and literacy
- literature and censorship
- literature and cognition
- literature and desire
- the theory of literature and theory for the teaching of literature

In addition, a total of over 3 of these 8 pages is given to lists of questions. Provoking, rather than analysing, is a perfectly appropriate, if occasionally frustrating, aim here. Nevertheless, Boomer’s essays do throw up a number of important issues – both for his time and for today.

The distinction between literature-as-ideas and literature-as-linguistic-artefact is not simply a dated reference to ‘form vs content’. The work of Gold and Michaels (2006), quoted earlier, puts the distinction well, as that between literature providing a perspective on an issue/concept/theme and an approach to literature which examines how texts might represent an issue and the ways in which such representations could shape understanding of that issue/concept/theme. The distinction was taken up by Reid himself in his discussion of the literature workshop in terms worth quoting at length:

We know that it’s usually not hard to get secondary school students talking about social responsibility … But we also know that discussions of this sort often tend to become glib and diffuse, and that encouraged in a literature class, they are more likely to lead attention away from the particulars of any text than to sharpen verbal and aesthetic perceptions. Suppose, then, that a teacher deftly introduces … a reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan … it is not too hopeful to imagine that … the class could soon come to recognise this principle: the extent to which the biblical tale persuades
or fails to persuade as a fictionalised proposition about ethical responsibility stems directly ... from the very form in which it is cast. That is, the simplification of parabolic narrative, its pebble-smooth contours, its avoidance of psychological or sociological information, its clearcut presentation of moral imperatives – all these qualities ... can surely be recognised as inherent in the genre of parable itself. (Reid, 1984, pp. 14–15)

It also picks up a by-now-familiar pairing in the history of the subject: *English-as-aesthetics* and *English-as-ethics* (Hunter, 1987; Patterson, 2000; Peel et al., 2000; Green, 2004). The aesthetic/ethics dimensions and their linking have been picked up by a number of literary theorists. Though Terry Eagleton sees 'the literary and their linking have been picked up by a number of literary theorists. Though Terry Eagleton sees ‘the literary as the vanishing point of the political’ (Eagleton, 1984, p. 25), others such as Wayne C. Booth argue against ‘the notion that an interest in form precludes an interest in the ethical powers of form’ (Booth, 1988, p. 7). Derek Attridge (2005, pp. 130–131) develops the argument that there is ‘an ethical dimension to any act of literary signification, and there is also a sense in which the formally innovative work … makes the most sharply challenging … ethical demand’.

Booth (1988, p. 4) also raises a fundamental issue which gets to the heart of Boomer’s valuing of literature: ‘If the powerful stories we tell each other really matter to us ... then a criticism that takes their ‘mattering’ seriously cannot be ignored’. I use the word ‘valuing’ deliberately. Boomer’s writing on literature is always bound up with values. The East Lansing Study Group which he chaired was investigating ‘Language, Literature, and Human Values’. Among the questions they addressed was the ways in which values (moral, social, personal, literary, aesthetic) enter a literary work, and how these can be processed in a classroom (Boomer, 1985, p. 164). Some of the Group reflected the literature-as-ideas/literature-as-linguistic artefact distinction in asking the question of whether ‘values proceed from literature to reader, or vice versa ... And if from literature to reader, do the values come explicitly via the content or implicitly via the style/form (?) Or both?’ (p. 163). Boomer’s own pre-conference paper for the Group included a section on ‘literature and values’, in which Boomer located the values question within the pedagogical relationship of teacher and student: ‘we teach profoundly what we are’, and our views on literature need to be transparent so students can confront them (Boomer, 1984/1988, p. 104). It is precisely in this discussion of what we might call the teacher/institution-as-text that he raises many of the questions that connect to critical literacy: students resisting the teacher’s values; students choosing texts; seeking to know in whose interests we teach; issues about the ideal society; looking beyond the Western canon – and a number of others. For Boomer, it is Booth’s ‘mattering’ that matters. His views on the role for literature consistently hit five issues: - ordering and understanding the self (what Green (2003, p. 164) calls the ‘self-subject’) - understanding society - cultural literacy - through questioning and critiquing, forging a new culture - related to each of the above, the necessity for students to be producing, as well as consuming, literature

Partly liberal-humanist, partly Romantic, partly reflecting a Dartmouth-linked individualism (a point taken up by the Study Group – 1985, p. 161), the agenda is ambitious, and one set of logical steps drives it towards a Cultural Studies project for literature and, related to this, towards a critical literacy. The ‘Cultural Studies’ project is, as I have said, at the heart of the ongoing (perhaps always inevitable) instability in Literary Studies. Robert Scholes, for example, argues strongly for a breadth of curriculum in English on the grounds that ‘We are ... the most mediated human beings ever to exist on this earth ... to function as a citizen ... one needs to be able to read, interpret, and criticise texts in a wide range of modes, genres and media’ (Scholes, 1998, p. 84). In Australia, it is for these reasons that Milner has argued that not broadening the objects of textual study will condemn the study of literature to the position now held by the Classics in educational institutions (Milner, 2005, p. 41). Scholes (1998, p. 19) agrees (‘what happened to Greek and Latin is now happening to English’) and here is Boomer in 1988:

It is pleasing to see how English teachers are beginning to liberate themselves from a narrow conception of the literary text. Once ‘text’ is conceived as a cultural artefact, any text, past or present, classic or popular, fiction or non-fiction, oral or filmic, can be admitted to the English classroom for legitimate and rewarding scrutiny, from the standpoint of ‘Who made this? In what context? With what values? In whose interests? To what effect?’ In this way, I see English teaching throwing off its long entrenched associations with a book capital ‘C’ culture. The new English will take its place in the total curriculum as a vigorous, hard-headed, socially-critical, productive field of engagement with the here-and-now
through its work with texts. This might not constitute a paradigm shift in itself, but it will mean substantial change to the content and direction of English teaching. (Boomer, 1988, pp. 7–8)

Green (2004, p. 295) recalls that in the late 1980s, Boomer had become increasingly interested in post-structuralism – especially in Foucault and Barthes – and in critical theory. In terms of critical literacy, it is interesting to remember that Boomer’s 1989 ‘Epic Challenge …’ paper coincided with the beginning of a series of a different kind of classroom coursebook in Australia coming out of Chalkface Press. These foregrounded aspects of literary theory and explicitly raised issues such as: whether language reflects or constructs reality; how readers might make decisions about different readings of a text; how characters are constructed; where readers’ expectations come from; how ways of reading change; what textual gaps or silences are; how readers are positioned by texts; how ideology works in texts, and how readings of the same text might compete (e.g. Martino & Mellor, 1995; Mellor, 1989; Mellor & Patterson, 1996; Mellor et al., 1987/1990; Moon, 1992/2001). By the early-mid 90s, international literature was increasingly driving these themes (e.g. McCormick 1994; Peim 1993; Griffith 1992), as was Australian scholarship (Misson, 1994; Morgan, 1997). I am not arguing any neat progression of approaches to English, as if ‘Growth’, or theories of response, for example, were simply displaced by critical literacy in any linear evolution, or, even less likely, that there was any inevitability about that move. Boomer’s own work, however, reflected the historical moments of both ‘response’ and ‘critical literacy’ in such a way as to both connect them and, for him, to posit the need to move beyond ‘response’ to the critical.

A central principle in Reid’s The Making of Literature is the importance of the social to the practices of the ‘Workshop’. This is in keeping with principles of ‘exchange’ and ‘exchange relationships’: a ‘text is a semantic process by which meanings are transacted through the verbal material’ (Reid, 1984, p. 56). Reading itself is ‘transactional’ – the transaction being between the individual reader and text (a process neatly complicated by Boomer in ‘Eternal Triangles …’), but in Reid’s ‘Workshop’, teaching and learning are also collaborative. This was not a model of the isolated reader responding alone, but rather a model of ‘making’ together: ‘There is what the author transacts with the reader and – mediating that exchange – there is also what teachers and students transact among themselves’ (Reid, 1984, p. 7). Reading is conversation, learning and teaching are social. Twenty-five years after Gusdorf – as quoted by Boomer – talked of literature bringing the dead back to life, Stephen Greenblatt declared of his own role as a literary scholar:

I began with the desire to speak with the dead. This desire is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies … If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them. (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 1)

I see this notion of literature-as-conversation specifically picked up by the set of practices common in Australia since the 1970s known as ‘imaginative re-creation’, which I think can be usefully conceptualised as just such a view of literature-as-conversation. Stratta et al. in 1973 conceptualised students having a creative role in relation to the work of fiction in order to ‘imaginatively re-create for [themselves] the experience of the novelist’ (Stratta et al., 1973, p. 70). Imaginative re-creation activities are a very specific direction in which the notion of ‘conversations’ with literature was taken up widely in Australia and England – echoed not only in Reid’s ‘workshop’, but also in Adams’ (1995, 2013) notion of ‘dependent authorship’, in Green’s ‘textshops’ (2006) and in Knights and Thurgar-Dawson’s (2006) ‘active reading’, as well as in work by Misson and Morgan (2006, pp. 189ff), Benton and Fox (1985), and, particularly, in Pope’s (1995) notion of ‘textual intervention’. Students in effect ‘converse’ with the original text through activities such as changing point of view or creating a character’s interior monologue. These acts of reading and re-writing are creative strategies – aimed at both responding to texts and creating texts. The key issue in Stratta et al.’s (1973, p. 87) original formulation – ‘interpretation by re-creation, and re-creation by interpretation’ – goes to the heart of the links which imaginative re-creation makes between responding to texts and creating texts. Creation of each of these new texts is an act of meaning making with respect to the preceding text/s. The creator of the ‘new’ text is as much working with a text as creating a new one. Scholes (1998, p. 97) sees the very future of English in just such student textual creation and re-creation – ‘a more effective form of analysis because more creative’.

Perhaps, ultimately, it is here that Boomer’s most overarching theme is captured. Literature as ‘conversation’, the move from response to the critical, from Literature to Cultural Studies, are each broadening
either the focus of study or the classroom processes in ways that highlight the social. The last word on this is from Boomer’s earliest essay here:

If [the teacher] ... is to teach anything it should be the art of conversation so that readers who leave ... for the wider world will have learnt how to seek out and engage with new voices. (Boomer, 1974/2010, p. 43)

Notes

1. Today, Years 7–10.
3. Only one voice in the professional literature of 1977 being considered here was an exception to this trend – Murison, who advocated traditional literary criticism (Murison, 1977b) and a Leavisite-oriented ‘values’ approach (Murison, 1977a) to literature teaching.
4. Reading is Response initiated a series of such books published by St Clair Press from 1980 to 1992. Imaginative re-creation was their characteristic pedagogy.

* I would like to thank the editors for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

References

Adams, P. (2013). At the far reach of their capacities: Responding to literature through writing literature. Putney: Phoenix Education.
Education Department of South Australia (1983). A single impulse: Developing responses to literature. Adelaide: Education Department of South Australia.


Wayne Sawyer is Professor of Education and Director of Research in the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney. His research interests include English curriculum history, English curriculum and pedagogy, and effective teaching, especially in low SES contexts. Contact Wayne at: W.Sawyer@uws.edu.au
Why Programming Matters: Aporia and Teacher Learning in Classroom Practice

Jo-Anne Reid
Charles Sturt University

I am one of those strange teachers who actually enjoy programming – in fact I love it. It is the most powerful I ever get, as a particular curriculum story that I am telling myself unfolds across the page, progressing in just the order, at just the pace, and with just the results I imagine will be best for my class, who are always cooperative and engaged learners in my imagination, eager to discuss the texts, quick to pick up the subtle meanings and connections I have woven into the fabric of our planned experience, and happy to suspend their disbelief in my promise that they will enjoy this activity, as well as learn from it. The reality, of course, is never quite like I imagine it. This is because, from the moment we enter the classroom, I play out my curriculum story with feedback – right from the first moment. Good morning. Yes? No? Yes and no? My plan, of course, was for yes, for everyone, but, if no, for even some, then my lovely curriculum story has a new complication. This is exciting rather than discouraging. I always begin a new class, unit of work or lesson with an optimistic wish that the story I told myself, as I was planning the teaching and learning that is about to take place, might perhaps ‘come true’ this time. But I have an equally optimistic confidence that whatever happens, I have up my sleeve a very good map of the territory we are meant to be covering, and we will not be wasting our time.

In this paper I want to think about why I am so confident about the benefits of programming, and use this opportunity to reflect on Garth Boomer’s influence on my own teaching practice to think more theoretically about programming in my own situation of practice – teacher education. Using Boomer’s own work on programming, along with an understanding of the concept of aporia in practice from Burbules (2000) and Green (2010), I want to explore why programming is central to teacher learning, and why it matters in teacher education, as novices engage in the process of learning to teach, and develop expertise as a teacher – to argue that, in fact, programming is a form of ongoing teacher education for all of us, every time.

Garth Boomer understood curriculum as a process ‘directed towards promoting valued knowledge, abilities and attitudes in the learner’, where what is ‘valued’ ‘encompasses the world view of both teacher and learner’ (Boomer, 1982, p. 151). He places planning and programming right at the front of this process – and in this statement, he was making an argument for the importance of teachers being prepared to ‘negotiate’ what happens in the classroom with their students. He saw this as ‘beginning with the teacher’s or the curriculum writer’s conception, proceeding through planning, and eventually reaching enactment and evaluation’ (Boomer, 1982, p. 151). As I have noted above, teaching is always an on-the-spot negotiation process, as teachers and students operate in dialogue with each other, so that the interaction, in practice, of the intent of the teacher and the response of the students is what produces the teaching-learning exchange. For Boomer, curriculum negotiation meant something more than this incidental and contingent adjustment. He wanted teachers to be more open to their students’ interests, world-views, learning needs and preferences, so that we would actually plan for these in a more meaningful way – as we imagined the experience that we were planning in our programs. A negotiated curriculum could not be fully planned and programmed ‘up front’, before we met the students, or signed off and approved before we began a unit of work. A negotiated curriculum foregrounds the dialogic work of planning, in an expanded sense, ‘composing the curriculum’, and in fact requires teachers to take agency and share their power of deciding what students do in classrooms.

Boomer once said that when he was an inspector of schools, he would often ask children in the classrooms he visited what they were going to be doing next – to see how well they understood the curriculum story they were part of. Most often, as he told it, they didn’t have a clue. A long time ago, when I was just a young teacher, my colleagues and I would often talk about three sorts of lessons we could identify in our teaching. First, there were the lessons we didn’t want to talk to anyone about, or even think about again ourselves if we could possibly help it. Second, there were those
lessons we had carefully planned and programmed, that were signed off by our Heads of Department, and that we thought ‘worked’ well enough to pass muster when the Inspector came to ‘certify’ us. They may have been a bit boring, but they were managed well because we had prepared so carefully. And then there were the ‘cuff and collar’ lessons that sometimes just seemed to happen (off the cuff and under the collar…) when we started out on our carefully planned lesson path but were stopped short by student resistance/response or excitement. Not knowing exactly what to do, we had stepped off the planned pathway and ended up somewhere else entirely – somewhere we were very happy to have been. Sometimes these lessons actually felt ‘brilliant’, and we told our colleagues that we wished we could plan for them. At that time we did not have a theoretical construct to apply to what we wished we could plan for them. At that time, the Inspector had been there to see our students so ‘brilliant’, and we told our colleagues that we wished we had been a bit boring, but they were managed well because we had prepared so carefully. And then there were the ‘cuff and collar’ lessons that sometimes just seemed to happen (off the cuff and under the collar…) when we started out on our carefully planned lesson path but were stopped short by student resistance/response or excitement. Not knowing exactly what to do, we had stepped off the planned pathway and ended up somewhere else entirely – somewhere we were very happy to have been. Sometimes these lessons actually felt ‘brilliant’, and we told our colleagues that we wished we could plan for them. At that time we did not have a theoretical construct to apply to what we were talking about, but it is what I am calling here *aporia* – the loss of a pathway (Burbules, 2000). For Green, though:

Aporia involves in turn another critical relationship: between undecidability and decision … or what has been described, more fully, as the ethics of undecidability and the politics of decision. This is surely the fundamental dilemma of professional practice, enacted constantly and even unceasingly, at all levels: the impossibility of knowing enough, of having enough information on the basis of which to make the right decision, in all the urgency and drama of the moment; and yet, the necessity of doing so, of acting, of moving on – the imperative to act, and doing so, but without guarantees. This, then, is something of what I mean when I refer to the (im)possibility of the project. (Green, 2010, p. 5)

As we talked them through in hindsight, it seemed that often these were lessons in which, as novice or early-career teachers, we had planned so well that we were able to relax our need for control, and were therefore able to go where the students needed to go, rather than where we had planned to take them – responding to their feedback in a diagnostic/dialogic way. In these lessons we actually had not lost power or control – we had relocated it outside ourselves and worked with it in the action of teaching and learning. We talked a lot about these lessons. It seemed that, for me, they only ever happened when the plans I had made were strong enough supports for me to have the confidence to try something that might make me lose my balance, but that if I did, I would still know where to step back to regain it. Some of my colleagues seemed to think that if we were not following our plans, we were getting better at teaching – and that this proved the staffroom folk-wisdom that lesson plans were actually a waste of time; that the structured work programs we were required to produce for the HOD each month were just for show, and could cease as soon as the Inspector certified us for permanency. They saw our apparently unplanned and impromptu lessons as evidence of the fact that ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ were separate and unconnected – that having learnt about teaching, they could now do it. Instead of spending time planning and preparing for teaching, thinking through a careful introductory sequence in their heads, and writing down the things they would need to make sure things happened in the way they imagined, they saw that they could already rely on the experience they were collecting ‘under the collar’ to get them through their days with more and more ‘off the cuff’ lessons.

As the weeks turned, though, this didn’t seem to work so well – and they had fewer and fewer stories of fantastic ‘cuff and collar’ lessons and more and more complaints about the kids and their behaviour. We advised them to keep up the programming, as it still seemed to be working for us. And as our first year passed, and we came to see and hear more about some of our other, more experienced colleagues, we also talked about another old staffroom saying, which seemed to fit with our ‘cuff and collar’ experience. This was the observation that ‘some teachers have twenty years’ experience – while others have one year’s experience twenty times’. This led us to question what it is about ‘experience’ that makes a good teacher. We already knew that we were getting better, but that learning from our experience was not changing our need for careful preparation. In fact, it almost seemed like the opposite was happening – the pleasure we were getting from the ‘fantastic’ lessons was making us more willing to plan and program for the next ones. As Boomer wrote about the pleasure of programming for teachers in general: they ‘work with theory to plan and predict. They create fiction about possible classroom worlds and then see if these can be created’ (Boomer, in Green, 1999, p. 3).

Of course we still kept having the other sorts of lessons we identified at the start of our first year of teaching, but we never again simply blamed ‘the kids’ for the dreadful ones – understanding that even the fiascos provided valuable information for imagining and planning how to start again the next day. With
what was a fairly simplistic view of practice at that point, I was sure that we were getting better because as the ‘cuff and collar club’, we were always reflecting on our practice in the pub after school, and talking about it with our colleagues. Our Head of Department had encouraged us to work together in our disadvantaged school to help support and sustain us as the latest intake of a regular turnover of beginning teachers. Some years later I was able to recapture this as a participant in a ‘language and learning’ professional development program led by Garth Boomer. Here we connected with other teachers right around Australia to research our own practice in curriculum planning and negotiation.

Right from the start, though, I could see that my lesson plans were getting better as I gained experience – they were more realistic in terms of how long things would take, and what resources I could predict would connect with the students … I began to see and value the difference between programming for a unit of work, at a larger scale, than for single lessons at a time. That allowed me to respond far more easily and confidently to what students were interested in, and build this in to my program – and that led to more of those ‘unexpected’ good lessons more regularly. Of course, the more times you do something, the better you must be at doing it: but it was the nature of the planning approach that I learnt from Garth Boomer and others engaged in exploring the connections between theory and practice in English teaching at the time – Bill Green, Bill Louden, Trish Gibson, Val Klenowski, Glenys Richards, Jon Cook, Peter Forrestal, and others – that gave me the confidence to see teaching as action research, to respond to directions from my students rather than try to lead them along my own planned pathway to the learning goals I was responsible for them achieving (Green & Reid, 1986).

This is the contradiction at the heart of learning from experience in professional practice, I believe. It is while we are programming that we first engage with and rehearse the manifestations of the educational and curriculum theory that we have available to us, in relation to a particular situation of practice. The storylines we imagine are constructed from the range of possible storylines the theory and the situation can generate – giving us the capacity and confidence to imagine ways of thinking and acting and speaking within the limits of the theory itself. These are finite, and because of their constraints, they support and enable us to produce a representation of practice in our program. It is always only the representation of ONE of a range of possible manifestations of practice, but it sets the parameters for us, so that if another possibility arises in the intersubjectivity of teaching and learning, we may be surprised, but we are not ambushed. At the point where we lose track of the path we have planned (what Burbules (2000) calls the point of aporia in practice theory), we are still able to go on without panic, improvising ‘off the cuff’, and sharing our decision-making power without losing our sense of control. As Boomer (in Green, 1999, p. 3) explained this: ‘Of course the theory may be submerged, but it is there. Without it, teachers could not act.’ It is if we cannot move off our path when it is blocked, and cannot take a sidetrack or detour to move forward toward the goals of the curriculum, that we are marooned in those dreadful unmentionable lessons from which we, and our students, really do not learn a great deal. Burbules’s description of the hermeneutic circle of experience explains this well:

A circle or loop can be a kind of aporia; a path that returns back upon itself. But there are different forms of this circle. One is a ‘vicious’ circle, a circle of simple repetition and reiteration, in which the same recycles repeatedly. But another kind of circle (call it ‘hermeneutic’) is one in which each return brings a reconsideration of the familiar from the vantage point of the novel – until the familiar becomes novel and the novel familiar, when the relations switch back again, and then again. Here the loop is a passage that represents change and growth. (Burbules 2000, p. 180)

The interruptions and roadblocks are not a problem, they are positive feedback which we can work with, especially when they allow us to learn more about the world-views of our students, and what is valued knowledge for them. If we have carefully imagined and created a representation of one way we can bring students to the knowledge, abilities and attitudes we value, then the information we gain from their resistance, misunderstandings and misconceptions, or whatever, allows us more agency to manoeuvre and work with them, rather than against them – even as we lose omnipotent control of the story as we had planned to tell it.

This is what Green (2010) refers to as the ‘undecidability’ that characterises teaching, and that he claims makes it, along with psychoanalysis and government, an ‘impossible profession’ – one in which ‘one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results’ (Freud 1937, p. 248). This is because we cannot control our situation of practice. It is the uncertainty of
teaching that I think Boomer was also working with, rather than against, in his argument for curriculum negotiation, and in his take-up of the action research tradition being elaborated and refined for educational contexts in the Deakin University context at that time (Carr & Kemmis 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982; Boomer (Ed.), 1981).

As someone who loves programming, I found Boomer’s own ‘seven column’ approach (Boomer 1982, pp. 156–157) the most powerful in preparing me with all the theoretical and practical resources that I needed to be able to confidently ‘lose control’ of my teaching in the interests of student learning. However, I have learnt over time that it doesn’t really matter what heuristic is used to help a teacher surface theory in imagining the story of a future teaching event. There are many good frameworks available to help us program (Green & Reid, 1986; Dixon, Gold & Yager, 2013), and although Boomer’s approach may seem a bit excessive to all but the most dedicated (and tragic) programmers, its value lies in the way it explicitly asks us to bring together and think about the elements of a curriculum plan in a way that foregrounds the values and purpose of a curriculum event (Boomer, 1982, p. 154). In this way it parallels Kieran Egan’s (1986) insight that, in arranging and designing curriculum, the stories we tell are governed ultimately by larger binary structures of thought and feeling, and it is these, the value statements of our curriculum intent, that we use to steer and negotiate our passage. Boomer’s curriculum elements (content/justification of content/products/skills and media to be practised/learning activities/aids and resources/assessment and evaluation of learning) are generally quite instrumental, neither surprising nor obviously different from other models (Dixon, Gold & Yager, 2013).

Deciding on, and designing, the scope and sequence of the content material we need to cover, for instance, is a given for all models. Although Boomer (1982) was writing in the context of school-based curriculum development, where teachers were given responsibility for decisions about what to teach as well as how to teach and evaluate it, decisions about most of these key factors are still seen as the professional responsibility of teachers (ACARA, 2011; NSWBOS, 2013). It is more likely today that decisions about content rest less securely with us or our students. State-mandated syllabus content will often dictate the conceptual and material content of the curriculum we design, and school subject department planning and resourcing usually decides the scope and sequence of that content, the resources and equipment we will work with, and the form of assessment of student learning outcomes at any point in time. All these may set the parameters of our creative planning, but they do not replace it, no matter how narrowly constraining they may seem to be. And while the content (what we are about to teach) may well seem to be non-negotiable for both ourselves and our students, what Boomer asks us to think about is why this content is worth being taught at all.

Boomer’s requirement for us to provide a justification of content (why teach this material to these students at this time?) is the key to the power of programming for me. Sometimes it is a difficult thing to justify spending time on a particular novel just because it is in the bookroom and nobody else has chosen it this term. Sometimes it might seem easy to ‘justify’ a unit of work on a particular topic ‘because it is in the exam’ – but this was not acceptable to Boomer, and nor is it to any teacher who has a theoretical and values-based understanding of curriculum and practice. In preparing to teach, we must engage carefully with the content as teachers (Shulman, 1986) – thinking about what is significant about it (Egan, 1986) in terms of curriculum and student knowledge. Representing our thinking about this as a program is a fully-fledged act of teaching – in imagination at this point, but requiring us to use and synthesise all our theoretical resources and knowledge about students, learning, teaching, context and curriculum to plan the action that will take place in the classroom. When we come to implement our program, we are therefore telling this curriculum story a second time, tracing over a pathway we have already travelled. As practice theory more generally explains (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; Green, 2009), this is how professional expertise develops. As Burbules (2000) notes, for instance:

One sometimes learns, initially, by tracing, following a pattern that has been set for one by others (as when one learns how to draw the shape of letters in the alphabet by tracing them). But when one starts using the letters to write, one is no longer tracing […] Similarly, one may recite the lines in a play, from memory. But the point at which one is acting – when one is able to go on – is the point at which one has gone beyond the pattern, added to and changed it, made it one’s own. The trace both facilitates and constrains, like a map that one follows. (Burbules, 2000, p. 181)

This is an approach to programming that sees it as teaching (or rather, perhaps ‘pedagogy’), rather than as preparation for teaching (something done for compliance and accountability rather than as the opportunity
to learn from a first iteration). It has been influential in my own learning as a teacher, and subsequently as a researcher and teacher educator. My doctoral study on programming as ‘synthetic practice’ (Reid, 1995) investigated the teaching of English to pre-service teachers. It took the form of action research into my practice as a teacher educator, searching for a way in which to (in those days) ‘empower’ my students with the capacity to design rich, high-quality curriculum that attended to the learning needs of students. I wanted them to be able to negotiate their teaching, in Boomer’s (1982) sense, rather than simply implementing a centrally designed set of mandated objectives that, by their very nature, could not recognise or respond to what students actually brought with them to the classroom. What Boomer’s programming model showed me, and what I still take from his work, is the belief that ‘teaching’ is a creative act, and that programming provides the opportunity for rich, classroom-centred professional development where I can guide my own learning. To extrapolate on the amazing insight that Deborah Britzman (1992) clarified for us all in Practice Makes Practice – when viewed in accordance with Boomer’s conception of programming, teaching makes teaching.

This highlights the value of considerations of aporia in practice, that I am focusing on here, and what I am claiming is the value of programming in learning how to teach – having the confidence to ‘go on’ without a map when the path we have prepared brings us to somewhere we had not foreseen, or when we are stopped in our tracks by something that we have encountered along the way.

It is the act of programming that predisposes us, as teachers, to think about the purpose or message of any curriculum story (Egan, 1986). It is a way of rehearsing, in the act of composing, a number of alternative storylines from among which we make a selection, as only one can be chosen this time, for this class, in imagination. Having written a program, therefore, we have already thought about some of the potential complications of a teaching narrative, some of the twists and turning points in the curriculum story, and we have already moved through them in imagination. We have already imagined the effect of the first words we say; the ‘question’, ‘invitation’ or ‘command’ (Green, 1990) through which we choose to frame a lesson or unit of work; the time we allocate for students to explore an idea in writing, or share their immediate responses to a poem or newspaper headline with a partner; the weighting we place on our assessment rubric for library research about a film we are studying; or the invitation to ask another class to provide the audience for a debate. The program is therefore already just one path we have followed. It got us safely through to our goal in our heads, and as a representation of our imagined success it is very useful because we know that its perfect realisation is ‘impossible’:

Perhaps the state of aporia is one to which we sometimes need to be returned; not by having a question answered but by seeing the contrast between the different versions of our understanding before and after – to recognise, rethink, our own understandings from the far end of a path we have traveled, and from which we return. (Burbules, 2000, p. 179, emphasis removed)

As I have argued here, programming matters for teachers. Programming and reflection are both significant forms of professional learning for teachers, and together they operate to turn experience into expertise (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980). And this underlines the importance and value of programming in initial teacher education, where we work to prepare teachers for the ‘impossibility’ of their work. In writing about the preparation of new psychoanalysts, Freud made the following argument, which I have redeployed for my own use here, with teachers:

Obviously we cannot demand that the prospective [teacher] should be a perfect being before [s/he] takes up [teaching], in other words that only persons of such high and rare perfection should enter the profession. But where and how is the poor wretch to acquire the ideal qualifications which [s/he] will need in his profession? The answer is, in an analysis of [him/herself, with which […] preparation for […] future activity begins. (Freud, 1937, p. 248, cited Green, 2010)

As a teacher educator, I cannot help remarking that even though recent government policy in this country seems to be actually aiming to select only ‘perfect beings’ for entry to the teaching profession, it is true that in supporting them to acquire their qualifications we do not provide much opportunity for pre-service teachers to analyse themselves, in a way akin to what Freud is suggesting. I was fortunate as a beginning teacher that reflection on our ‘cuff and collar’ lessons with my colleagues taught me that my best teaching seemed to happen when the plans I had made were strong enough supports to give me confidence when I lost my balance. I came to know that my careful programming meant that if I did, I would still be able to step forward and regain my footing, even if in a different place. I was lucky that Garth Boomer’s vision
for teaching as negotiation was available, then, to support my belief in the value of programming.

If analysis makes analysts, and teaching makes teaching, it is clear that the practice of programming is an important way for this to occur, pre-service as well as in-service. Overseas approaches to ‘lesson study’ (Lim et al., 2011) for instance, which recognise and build on the importance of programming and reflection in continuing teacher education are increasingly being taken up in the Australian context (Kreiwaldt, 2013). Boomer’s approach to programming asks us to fully understand that teaching is a matter of values-driven intellectual engagement with the content and the classes that we teach, in order to negotiate meaningful experiences in which we are all learners. Teaching and learning always happens in dialogic, situated, constrained, and less than ideal circumstances: it is always an impossible ideal (Green, 2010). But when we see that this impossibility is productive, that learning to teach is a creative process, that successful teaching is not a matter of getting it ‘right’, but of practising, and learning from experience (Reid, 2011), we are better able to design pre-service teacher education that can assist pre-service teachers to learn in and from a much richer engagement in the act of programming – in imagination, in theory, and as practice.

We need, I think, a more courageous, risky approach to teaching – a way of teaching and not a method – one that respects the educational importance of both doubt and confidence, both strangeness and familiarity, both being lost and finding a way (Burbules, 2000, p. 185).

References
Rotterdam: Sense.

Jo-Anne Reid is Professor of Education and Associate-Dean of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University. Her recent work is focused on teacher education and rural schooling, and her publications include Literacies in Place: Teaching Environmental Communications (PETA, 2007), co-edited with Barbara Comber and Helen Nixon. Contact Jo-Anne at: joreid@csu.edu.au
Introduction
Garth Boomer’s thinking influenced many of us working in school English during the time he was alive. But the ripple effects of his legacy continue to be felt. For me, it is Boomer’s interests in metaphor and meaning that resonate most. The use of tropes and figure is a distinctive feature of his writing and offers a rich allegorical resource for current reflections on curriculum. In this paper, I explore the potential of metaphor for thinking in new ways about the relationship of grammar to key issues facing school English. Drawing on key figures in Shakespeare’s play The Tempest, the paper makes use of an old association between the word ‘grammar’ and the practice of magic. In early 14th-century parlance, the word ‘gramarye’ was adapted from Old French to refer to ‘learning, especially philology, but also magic, incantation, spells, mumbo-jumbo.’ It had a secondary meaning – occult knowledge – which evolved in Scottish into ‘glamour’. If teachers in English can learn to re-imagine grammar as a source of magic in the work of English, they will be in a far better position to take up its available resources. Prior to this, however, we need to recognise its usefulness to literary study (what is often called stylistics), its bounty for playful work on language as system, its rhetorical power in text composition, and its analogical relevance to multimodal communication. These enterprises call for a re-imagining of grammar, or what we call ‘grammarics’, following Halliday’s lead (Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011). The Tempest is a rich resource in this regard. It offers compelling images of disciplinary power (and its limits), of desire and relatedness, of design and of development.

Boomer’s focus on ‘metaphor-making and meaning-making’ (Green, 1988, p. viii) is central to this enterprise. This is not to suggest that Boomer was a theorist of grammar – far from it. But his work offers encouragement to a re-configuring of curriculum with metaphor and meaning at the centre of the dialogue. Boomer represented teaching as a kind of dance in which one partner leads and another follows:

The metaphor of the dance helps me to represent the idea that although one person, the teacher, may have formal permission to lead, the other person, the student, can and does lead as well, in ways which can be mirrored and then elaborated by an imaginative partner. (Boomer, 1988, p. 6)

The metaphor aptly represents the interactive nature of work that leads development in English and puts relatedness at the centre of the enterprise, a value that is communicated in the love relationship that catalyses events in The Tempest, as we will see.

English is a boat …
Metaphors anchor abstractions in experience and hold complex ideas and feelings in a vivid gestalt. They make space for the ‘yet to be thought’ and for the longings that cannot be named in language, or not easily anyway. What Charles Sanders Pierce called ‘abductive reasoning’ is different from processes of deduction and induction that are so highly valued in the sciences. It is akin to the ‘guessing’ that underlies powerful detective work (Pierce, 1929) in which we hold contrarieties in play, without their collapsing under the weight of logical contradiction. Abduction is an associative process that produces metaphoric connections between one thing and another, allowing us to think in new ways about familiar experience. It is the kind of logic that enables us to draw profitably from The Tempest in reflections on grammar. English is a field of metaphor – a disciplinary space in which the imaginary is both the subject of study (qua literature) and a way of thinking about this (qua abductive reasoning). In some of his later work, Boomer reflected on the uses of imagination in learning.

Imagination is at the heart of learning. Imagination is what differentiates human beings from the rest of the animal world. We are able to hold images in our heads and think about them in the same way that we think about the real world. And so, imagination frees us from the tyranny of the here-and-now. It allows us to go back into the past and forward into possible futures. Through
imagination we can be where physically we are not. Imagination is the ‘Tardis’ of human kind. (Boomer 1999, p. 15)

The Tempest is set on an island ruled by a powerful mage, Prospero, who lives there in exile with his daughter Miranda, served by a spirit called Ariel and lording it over the dark figure of Caliban, who is despised by his master. In Act 1, Scene 1, the passengers and crew of a boat are caught in the chaos of terrible storm. The crew cannot negotiate the tempest and the vessel founders, to the sound of terrible words ‘We split, we split’ as all on board are tossed overboard. At the end of this first scene, it seems that the shipwreck has ended the lives of all on board. But, as the play unfolds, we discover that the characters are stranded on an unfamiliar island and some powerful magic is at work. School English too is a disciplinary ‘boat’ tossed about by contrary winds and unfamiliar territory. Teachers are being called to negotiate competing pressures to ‘add value’ to their students’ achievement on high-stakes testing and provide experience of multi-literacies. In fact, the graphic novel Maus, by the American cartoonist, Art Spiegelman, recently became a set text for Year 12 study in the Victorian Certificate in Education, and the Australian War Memorial website is a set text for the same year level in NSW. Multimodality is becoming core business for English.

Like the survivors of the tempest in Shakespeare’s play, teachers must enable students to engage with the relatively narrow band of competencies tested in the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and with the centrifugal energies of multi-literacies. How do they manage the curriculum ‘boat’ without splitting asunder? What kinds of knowledge about language, literature and literacy will support their work on texts so that they develop knowledge cumulatively rather than ‘segmentally’ (Maton, 2009)? As Gunther Kress has often observed, English has entered an era of ‘radical instability’ in its social and communicational landscape and this calls for ‘navigational aids’ that enable educators to steer a course through turbulent seas (Kress, 2006). Navigation is a skill for locating the navigator’s position compared to known locations or patterns. But which locations and which patterns?

In an expanded curriculum field, the question of locations and patterns must be asked afresh. The communicational landscape is altering as we look at it, inviting reflection on the scope and orientation of grammatical study. No one really doubts that understanding the structure of messages in sentences is necessary to knowledge about language. But message structure can be considered more broadly. Tagging, for example, is a pervasive strategy for linking messages in blogs but this can be related to (and distinguished from) logical-semantic links in traditional written texts. Point of view is important to understanding of subjectivity in the novel and its grammatical basis can enrich literary interpretation. But there are important commonalities between point of view in linguistic narratives and that generated in literary picture books or animated films (Unsworth, 2013 & in press). Can we develop navigational tools to orient students to the commonalities and differences in contemporary texts and modes? Can grammatical study be re-configured so that it is ‘good enough’ to meet the needs of teachers and students and interface with this new and complex environment?

New points of reference for negotiating the territory
If English is a disciplinary ‘boat’ attempting to negotiate heavy seas and contrary winds, the shoals and islands through which it drifts are also unfamiliar, calling for new kinds of knowledge and direction-finding. Key figures in Shakespeare’s Tempest embody different but complementary perspectives on the vexed question of grammar. At the centre of the drama is Prospero – a mage who understands book lore and applies it to his advantage on his isolated island. Prospero embodies the magic of specialised expertise often associated with the academy. Through his learning, he is able to command ships to founder and sailors to (appear to) drown. But his expertise is unrelated, isolated and abstruse. Early in the play, we learn that his knowledge has put him at odds with his brother, Sebastian, and that his daughter, Miranda, has been allowed to grow up without opportunities for relationship with others in the wider social world she longs to join. Linguistics is often viewed as a typical example of specialised expertise with interests in school English. It tends to be focused on understanding of arcane systems and distinctions in language that can appear irrelevant to everyday tasks of teaching. But actually all theoretical knowledges exist in a complex relationship to the practical aspects of teaching. Whilst English teachers depend on expertise – linguistic, semiotic, literary, critical, etc – they are suspicious of them too (rightly perhaps) and the term ‘academic’ is not a commendation in this domain, especially when it also
means ‘isolated from relatedness and from pedagogic practice’.

In fact, the academy casts a shadow and its neglected aspect is embodied in The Tempest by the character of Caliban, a powerful reminder of the limits of Prospero’s power. Caliban is a comic figure, half-man, half-beast, who now despises his master even though he rescued Prospero when he and Miranda were first marooned on the island. Prospero orders Caliban to fetch and carry as a despised slave and Caliban’s revenge fantasy is an understandable response. Hegemonic knowledge, that wielded by Prospero, is often blind to its own motives and assumptions. Post-structuralism, post-colonialism and various feminisms have challenged the authority of master-narratives from the academy. They call attention to the limits of all knowledges, especially those unaware of their taken-for-granted assumptions. Feminist theorists like Audre Lorde have problematised the notion of the toolkit, arguing that we ‘cannot dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools’ (Lorde, 1984). In her 1984 address to a conference about feminism, Lorde quotes Caliban’s response to Prospero in a radical version of the play produced by Aimé Césaire:

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all of our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

Prospero, you are a master of illusion.
Lying is your trademark.
And you have lied so much to me
(Lied about the world, lied about me)
That you have ended by imposing on me
An image of myself.
Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior,
That’s the way you have forced me to see myself
I detest that image! What’s more, it’s a lie!
But now I know you, you old cancer.
And I know myself as well.

(Caliban, in Aimé Césaire’s A Tempest)
(Lorde, A. 1984, 3)

Caliban’s words trouble the epistemology represented by Prospero and those in the academy who promote false images of one’s identity. For those of us with an interest in the power of linguistics, it is tempting to ignore the limits of its analytical purview and to elide discomfiting messages from the margins of society. Caliban presents a problem to Prospero and is a reminder of the unconscious forgetting in metalinguages imposed in non-reflexive ways, from above.

There are hopeful figures in The Tempest, however, which remind us of the protean character of English. Ariel is an androgynous character who implements the will of Prospero, aware of the potential of his magic but longing for personal freedom. S/he understands the power of design for intervening in reality but also of the need to re-shape its possibilities (make new meanings). In fact, she deploys her occult powers to keep the sailors alive, to forestall murder, and to arrange for meetings that portend reconciliation of Prospero and his brother and pave the way for his return to the real world. Ariel’s resources for intervening in such situations are crucial to her magic. In a parallel way, students need access to principles of design and shaping and re-shaping of resources in texts. These designs can be left implicit (as in Ariel’s magic, the source of which we never hear about) or they can be made explicit (as Prospero acknowledges at the end of the play). Their collaboration suggests that access to explicit principles of design (via metalanguage and its underpinning theory) and exposure to the implicit power of design (via immersion in texts and practices) are both crucial.

Finally, we come to the central love interest in The Tempest in the relationship between Miranda and Ferdinand, who embody the relatedness principle in the play. It is not power or knowledge or magic that transforms these characters on Prospero’s Isle. It is love. Their encounter is the motive force for all that happens in this play from the moment of their first encounter onwards. In a parallel way, the tools we use in English must foster creative excursions of students and enhance their literacy repertoires throughout the long apprenticeship of schooling. Students need to learn about desire (as Miranda does when she encounters Ferdinand for the first time) and discipline (as Ferdinand does when he must work as a labourer for Prospero in order to demonstrate his fidelity to Miranda).

These characters from The Tempest communicate different kinds of knowing in English. They remind us of the power of complementary perspectives necessary to a full account of any phenomenon. In fact, no one description, source of knowledge or even metalinguage can encompass all aspects of learning. The play calls attention to the demands of relatedness and desire (carried by Ferdinand and Miranda), the complex power of disciplinary expertise (embodied in
both Prospero and Caliban), the resources of design (in the figure of Ariel) and development (the change experienced by almost all the characters in the reconciliation of the play’s final scenes). A theory related to complementarity stands a greater chance of becoming adequate to English. In fact, Halliday accommodates ‘the uncertainty principle’ in his approach to grammar, acknowledging the partiality of all descriptions:

The grammar has to impose discontinuity on the flux of experience; but the human condition – our total relationship to our environment – is complex and many-faceted, so there will be indefinitely many ways of doing this … An example would be tense and aspect as complementary theories of time. These contradict each other: either time is a linear flow out of past to present into future, or it isn’t. Yet many languages, perhaps all, insist that it both is and is not: in very different mixtures and proportions, but each amounting to a plausible theory for coping with the everyday world. (Halliday, 1998, p. 379)

Building uncertainty, or fuzziness, into grammatical study may help deal with complexity but is not easily managed within a profession so dubious about grammar of any kind.

The problem of grammar (and what we can do about it)
The problem is that even the term ‘grammar’ comes with baggage that is hard to shed. Furthermore, its definition is problematic. In the papers informing the national curriculum, for example, ‘grammar’ is defined as ‘the language we use and the description of language as a system’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 5). Thus the same word is used for the resource and its analysis, and this has led to countless problems of vili

All grammarians pay special attention (to varying degrees) to the formal structure of language and have to ‘turn language back on itself’ to do so. If only for this reason, some degree of slippage between language and meta-language is inevitable. But the grammar of unselfconscious communication is not the same as the grammar of analysis. And Halliday proposes that we minimise the problem by distinguishing between ‘grammatics’ (as theory) and ‘grammar’ (as practice). But this does not mean that our metalanguage has to be entirely unrelated to the phenomenon it names. We can develop a metalanguage that mimics the character of language, especially if our theory attends to meaning in the first instance. The mimetic power of systemic functional grammatics (Halliday, 2002) would have appealed to Garth Boomer because the labels are meaningful in themselves and support meaning-based discussion of language choices. Within the domain of transitivity, for instance, the grammar of action is analysed in terms of Actors, Material Processes and Goals, whilst the grammar of thought is analysed in terms of Senses, Mental Processes and Phenomenon. In systemic-functional grammatics (SFG), labels help to bring out the nature of the work done by the grammatical choices (Halliday, 1994).

In addition to developing a metalanguage that resembles the phenomenon it names and recognising that it is distinct from this, we can highlight the redundancy between choices, arrangements and patterns of language. This appears to be what the curriculum writers are referring to when they mandate that students will ‘learn about the structures and functions of word-and sentence-level grammar and text patterns and the connections between them’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 7). In SFG, we can show how the ‘mimetic’ approach applies at levels of text, sentence and word. For example, point of view is a feature of texts as a whole (where the viewpoint of a character in a narrative refracts the significance of what happens); it is also a feature of clauses, where perception is represented through mental process verbs (like seeing); and it is founded on units of choice such as verbs or verb groups (like sensing verbs). In this way, attention to units of meaning draws on but is not limited to units of form. Processes of identification (e.g. of verb groups) open out onto processes of description (e.g. of the types of process carried via verb groups) and these enter into processes of interpretation of patterns of process in a text (e.g. of alternating choices for action in material process clauses and for reaction in mental process
clauses). Thus our grammatics can contribute to and interact with higher-level understandings in discourse semantics (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2003). But this redundancy between features in texts (e.g. focalisation), arrangements in syntagms (e.g. transitivity) and formal realisation of these (e.g. verb groups) has yet to be taken up in school English.

Part of the problem is that school English still works with traditional school grammatics (if it works with any). And this is focussed on form (rather than function), on the ideal (rather than the real), and on the sentence (rather than the text). SFG is wider in scope, richer in meaning-base (adopting what Halliday calls metafunctions to account for different kinds of meaning), and can be applied to texts. A grammatics ‘good to think with’ (Halliday, 2002) and ‘good to use’ in English needs to support analytical activities beyond parsing of sentences, clauses and phrases; it needs to inform intuitions about text organisation, world-building and reader-positioning, to name only some of the communicative tasks facing students of English. Only a multilevel and meaning-based grammatics will support these tasks but the toolkit has to be seen as useful by teachers and students in classrooms.

Beyond verbal texts, there are multimodal texts like Maus and The Australian War Memorial website which demand analysis of image and verbiage if students are to understand the multimodal meaning of the whole text. Recent work in the field of visual communication has sought to exploit semantic commonalities between meaning making in image and verbiage to analyse multimodal texts (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Of course, images cannot be analysed satisfactorily using analytical tools modelled on language. Nevertheless, there is an analogic potential that is useful for moving between the resources deployed in one mode and those in a parallel way in another. A visual representation of point of view is (somewhat) like a verbal representation in that it anchors experience in a character’s perception and provides access to his/her interior world. The functional orientation of SFG makes it easier to interrelate point of view in language and image and thus to imagine a grammatics that is relevant to multimodality (even if partial and problematic in some respects).

Expanding the power of the tools goes some way to resolving the problem of grammar in English. But in truth, like Caliban, many in English are wary of its (sometimes imperious) claims. Decades of research in Australia and other Anglophone countries has revealed that substantive study of grammar ‘disappeared’ from the curriculum because it bore little relationship to study and composition of texts (Andrews, 2005; Andrews et al., 2006). Several studies have confirmed that a decontextualised study of traditional or structuralist grammar offers little or no beneficial effects on students’ writing (Perera, 1984; Wilkinson, 1971; Wyse, 2001). Apart from some promising research on sentence combining techniques in some classrooms (Saddler & Graham, 2005), grammar has often been taught as a kind of ‘naming of parts’ with occasional forays into rhetorical approaches (e.g. Sawyer, 2009, 2011). More recently, these findings and their dispiriting implications have been challenged by several studies with a more functional or rhetorical orientation. In England, for example, student writing has been improved through ‘embedded grammar’ instruction (Myhill, 2005, 2008; Myhill et al., 2012). Similar results have been observed for English language learners using systemic functional metalanguage in classrooms in the United States (Schleppegrell, 2013).

Rethinking grammatics for school English

In Australia, there have been several small-scale studies drawing on key grammatical tools in the SF toolkit and the results are similarly promising (e.g. Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Jones & Chen, 2012). Related projects exploring the potential of systemic-functional grammatics confirm the strengths of a meaningful engagement with language as a resource for meaning rather than as a rule-governed system (French, 2010, 2012; Williams, 1999, 2005).

A recent project in which I have been involved has built on this earlier work and developed a grammatics oriented to the interests of primary and secondary English teachers (Macken-Horark, 2009, 2011; Macken-Horark, Love & Unsworth, 2011). This Discovery project aims to develop a grammatics useful to:

1. **Discipline** – disciplinary practices in narrative in 2011, persuasion in 2012 and text response in 2013;
2. **Development** – Enhancing students’ literacy repertoires especially changes in compositions after each intervention;
3. **Design** – Understanding language as a resource for making meaning (a multilevel toolkit);
4. **Desire** – Working with texts of many kinds (encouraging conversation about and composition of literary and non-literary, mono and multimodal texts).
Our project has extended the scope of grammatics to include not just the study of form and function in wordings but the patterns of meaning these co-create in texts. Beyond this, we are exploiting the analogic potential of SF grammatics to analyse meanings in images, blogs, picture-books and films. An example from the field of narrative may illustrate how we are re-configuring grammar so as to provide points of connection with each of these four coordinates.

In the disciplinary practices of English, study of narrative is central. And a key aspect of narrative theory is point of view, often called ‘focalisation’ (Genette, 1980). Learning to understand how interiority is created in narratives is important if students are to identify resources deployed to position readers to ‘feel with’ a character. Patterns of action and reaction are common in short stories, as texts shunt between events in a narrative world (action) and evaluations of these by focalising characters (reaction). The grammatics project has endeavoured to make the interface between narrativity as a key disciplinary practice and to show how focalisation (amongst other strategies) influences resources for meaning at different levels of choice (design). For example, ‘getting inside a character’s head’ is primarily cued through mental processes, often called ‘sensing verbs’ (e.g. ‘She saw ...’ ‘She wondered ...’ ‘She felt ...’). This is only a prototypical resource. A grammatics for design connects text-, sentence- and word-level choices. Continuing with our example from focalisation, we can see that internal focalisation tends to occur in evaluation stages of a narrative, where the point or significance of what happens is foregrounded. This semantic pressure ‘from above’ influences lower-level choices, for example, through projection of speech or thought as a character or narrator comments on (or reacts to) events and through vivid sensing verbs. In this way, word-level choices are framed by choices at sentence level and choices at these levels are influenced by choices at higher levels of composition. Thus, a semantically unifying metalanguage like focalisation yields different but meaningfully related ‘realisations’ at text, sentence and word levels. It is the fractal principle really – a pattern of patterns – that helps us to know that what we are reading is narrative.

More complex resources for creating interiority emerge over time. In later years, students will read and (hopefully) produce narratives that sustain viewpoints and explore contrasting points of view. For example, a student writer might produce a narrative opposing a mother’s view on her daughter’s behaviour and the daughter’s viewpoint. Or s/he might experiment with the viewpoints generated by unreliable narrators. In terms of a literacy repertoire, we have found evidence of an expanded repertoire for representing viewpoints in our students’ writing. This is not simply a result of improved knowledge about the meaning potential of focalisation. We only invest in a particular skill, technology or system when we are motivated to do so. Our project underscores the importance of desire in developing narrative effectiveness. Of course, this is not enough. Desire needs to be in relationship to disciplinary knowledge and to the possibilities of design in language itself. Students need to learn about the resources for creation of point of view in literature, in language and in their own reading and writing.

But, again, whilst this is necessary, in contemporary English internal focalisation is a feature not only of written stories but also of picture books, animated films and feature films. Narrativity is transmodal. We can also get inside a character’s head through what is often referred to as the ‘point of view’ (or shot-reverse-shot) in film theory (Caldwell, 2005, p. 93). A cumulative knowledge cannot be effectively built on the basis of an additive metalanguage in which we keep adding to the metalanguage as we encounter a new form or mode of meaning. In a relational grammatics, we can take a higher-order notion like focalisation and explore its different realisations in one mode and relate it to those in another. In our project, we are using multimodal grammatics to explore the role of internal and external focalisation in novels like Tim Winton’s Blueback and in texts like Anthony Browne’s picture-book, The Tunnel, in text and digital animation versions of Shaun Tan’s The Lost Thing. In this way, we are opening up to the potential of a multimodal toolkit that can be deployed across narratives in different modes.

Of course, some students manage to produce narratives with sophisticated psychological viewpoints without a metalanguage for reflecting on this. But a grammatics ‘good-enough’ for school English should provide opportunities for reflection on point of view to all students. Continuity of learning for students in Years 4, 6, 8 and 10 (the year levels of our project) can only be provided if teachers have access to a shared metalanguage for developing such understandings. There should be recognisable links between early and later learning about literate strategies like focalisation and plotting, to name only a few. In this way, the grammatics is in dialogue with a literary metalanguage and
thus create connections between the Language and Literature strands of any curriculum in English.

Our project drew on the navigational metaphor of the compass to represent the coordinates of the territory. Here I explore these using a heuristic akin to that used in the grammatics project (Macken-Horarik, 2009, 2011; Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011). But here I adapt the figure to connect with four parameters in landscape of English generally (in bold) and relevant touchstones of classroom work on point of view as illustrated above (in brackets):

**Discipline**  
(What happens & what counts in English e.g. in narrativity)

**Design**  
(Salient resources for meaning e.g. in creation of point of view)

**Development**  
(Texts of different kinds & modes e.g. short stories, picturebooks & animated films)

**Desire**  
(Expanding Literacy repertoires e.g. management of point of view)

This is a theoretical exercise that must always be aware of its limits, attentive to the long shadow cast by any knowledge base, especially one as elaborated and ambitious as SFG. Garth Boomer, too, acknowledged the importance of theory in English and advocated awareness of the limits of theory and the ongoing need for action research in classrooms:

The test of a good theory, I believe, is the extent to which the theory can encompass a theory of its own inadequacy. If the theory is not predicted on its own eventual demise, it is suspect. By this criterion, the learning theory I espouse … does lead inevitably to the conclusion that by a process of action and reflection, the theory will itself be modified or replaced eventually (Boomer, 1988, p. 6).

Grammatically-informed knowledge, no matter how powerful, cannot be promulgated by fiat and transmitted to teachers to implement without negotiation. Unlike Ariel, English teachers have a degree of agency as well as responsibility for learning outcomes. Any theory that is going to be good to think with and good to use must change in the course of the dance between teachers and linguists (and semioticians, too) and between teachers and students. Garth Boomer’s work in school English reminds us of the possibilities and the joy of the dance.

**References**


---

*Figure 1: Theoretical compass points for navigating a complex environment in English*


Mary Macken-Horarik is an Associate Professor in English and Multiliteracies Education in the School of Education at the University of New England where she has worked for the last five years. She has a special interest in the intellectual and pedagogic possibilities of systemic functional linguistics. This paper emerged from part of the Garth Boomer address that Mary gave at the 2013 AATE conference and was inspired by Boomer’s work on metaphor and meaning. Contact Mary at: mmackenh@une.edu.au
Teachers as Researchers: 
A ‘Fair Dinkum’ Learning Legacy

Barbara Comber
Queensland University of Technology

Introduction

As we encounter a policy landscape where increasingly the education lexicon includes keywords such as data, evidence, quality, standards, it is interesting to revisit Garth Boomer’s contribution regarding teachers as researchers. As an early-career classroom teacher in the mid-1970s, I was inspired by Boomer’s provocation to engage with research as a practitioner seeking evidence of learning (or not learning). Since that time, convinced of the power of teacher research in enhancing both student and teacher learning, I have devoted a good deal of my academic life to finding ways of supporting teachers to engage in research – from finding funds to facilitate teacher-researcher networks, through designing research projects with teacher-researchers as key collaborators, to embedding practitioner inquiry in university courses wherever possible pre- and in-service.

In Fair Dinkum Teaching and Learning, Boomer (1985) clearly named at least two key problems which I believe still face the educational community. Firstly, drawing on the sociologist Basil Bernstein, he explained that schools typically contribute to the reproduction of educational success and failure, whereby some students come ‘to believe that they are capable of seeking, possessing, and banking on knowledge’ (Boomer, 1985, p. 122) and ‘the other group, those who fail, tend to believe that knowledge is “elsewhere”, not to be possessed, to be deferred to, rebelled against, or distrusted’. In this way, Boomer (1985, p. 122) argued ‘knowledge capitalism is reinforced from generation to generation’. Current results of national and international literacy tests suggest that social background is still a key factor in young people’s educational trajectories in Australia, with the children of the poor statistically likely to perform in the lower levels.

Secondly, he named the divide between what he called ‘big R’ research, which he saw as ‘a postgraduate luxury’ and what actually goes on in schools, which he argued are not thinking and learning institutions. In other words, he found both schools and universities wanting. He wanted teachers ‘to seek out knowledge and test it in action; that is, to do research’ (Boomer, 1985, p. 123). Following Boomer’s provocation, on the one hand I have long raged against the anti-intellectualism I sometimes overhear amongst teacher-participants at conferences and workshops, and on the other hand the blaming of teachers which is so rampant in the academy. The refusal to learn from and with each other – university and school-based educators – continues to hold us back as a profession.

Here I revisit what I have learned from my collaborative work with teacher-researchers, with Boomer’s key messages in mind. In particular, I draw on insights from his paper, already cited above, entitled, ‘Addressing the problem of elsewhere: A case for action research in schools’, where he argues that schools produce citizens with distinctly different consciousness with respect to knowledge – those who believe they can find it and possess it and those who believe it is elsewhere and not for them. I begin by briefly outlining the emergence of ‘teacher research’ internationally, and demonstrate that this was a discourse from which Boomer both drew and contributed. By referring to three current research projects, involving action research, I consider what’s involved in being a teacher-researcher now in the contemporary policy context and discuss the extent to which these studies have provided opportunities to negotiate the kinds of research relationships and teacher learning that Boomer envisaged. My intention is not to discuss the teachers’ action research nor their data here, but rather, to reflect what I have learned and continue to learn from working with teacher-researchers in these different contexts, that might have relevance for literacy education and research.

Emergence of teacher research: Key proponents and principles

There is not space here to adequately address the history of teacher research, but it is important to note that it has had specific, yet somewhat over-lapping, histories of emergence in different places, and to point to some of its key proponents (see Somekh & Noffke, 2009). Along the way it has been known as action...
research, practitioner inquiry, participatory research or teacher inquiry, to name but a few of the variations. Action research, for example, grew from Kurt Lewin’s work in the 1930s and 40s in designing participatory approaches to research that ordinary people could use to address everyday problems they experienced in communities or institutions (Adelman, 1993). In the United Kingdom there is a long and continuing tradition of collaborative action research in education, often supported through the universities (Elliott, 1991; Somekh, 2005). Action research in Australia was informed by the pioneering work of Carr and Kemmis (1985) and became widespread with the circulation of The Action Research Planner (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), which was used in many post-graduate courses and professional development programs. In the US, practitioner inquiry or teacher-researcher communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2007) mushroomed particularly in the 1980s, especially in connection with writing, and other literacy, related projects.

Boomer would have been familiar with all of this work. As an educational leader and bureaucrat, he remained throughout his life an avid scholar; he read widely (and interrogated) educational theory and research. In the 80s, he argued that action research is ‘deliberate, group or personally owned and conducted, solution-oriented investigation’ (Boomer, 1985, p. 124). By his logic, ‘research is deliberate learning’. Hence, not surprisingly and consistent with the key principle of action research to democratise inquiry, he saw action research as equally appropriate for students as for teachers.

Since schools and universities are institutions for the promotion of deliberate learning, all teaching … should be directed towards the support of deliberate, personally owned and conducted, solution-oriented investigation. All teachers should be experts in ‘action research’ so that they can show students how to be ‘action researchers’. (Boomer, 1985, p. 125)

He went on to explain how by this logic it was necessary to negotiate the curriculum, so that learner and teacher intents and purposes for learning could drive the inquiries. However, in this same chapter he recognised the disappointing typical realities of schooling and contended that:

Between the preschool child and the adult researcher, there is schooling where teachers traditionally tend to pose the problems and set the tests. Schooling is therefore likely to result in some atrophying or retardation of the learner’s brain power, because most of the school answers are already known and known to be already known. (Boomer, 1985, p. 127)

Boomer’s critical insight and his preparedness to name and confront educational shortcomings as a leading educational bureaucrat was rare then, and some may argue even rarer today. After an extended period of time working as an educational bureaucrat, Boomer was all too aware of the tendencies of schools and systems to sustain inertia. He aspired to a grassroots theory of change, where teachers were central agents in the process.

I would like to feel that teacher cooperatives working to transform practice could link arms across the nation as a stalwart band of action-researchers and eventually prevail in changing the face of teaching. (Boomer, 1999, p. 114)

His capacity to imagine a different kind of teacher workforce was breathtaking. Key principles historically associated with action research – its focus on experienced problems, classroom and school-based inquiry processes, teacher action and data-informed change to practice and policy – require both a highly educated and ethical practitioner. Action research is not a neutral or instrumental endeavour. Indeed action research always involves critical analysis of the ways in which current practices impact on different participants. It is always concerned with questions of justice. It always involves a systematic investigation rather than working from assumptions or taking for granted how things are. In whose interests and with what effects are current ways of working? What changes can be made to improve equitable outcomes? Teacher-researchers are prepared to explore the effects of their practices on different learners. They are prepared to explore blind spots, unintended consequences, and different ways of seeing and interpreting what’s going on. They have a high tolerance for complexity and uncertainty. They are prepared to go public with their learning. This work is tough and, as I will discuss later, teacher-researchers need inquiry communities with whom they can explore and have risky dialogues among trusted colleagues.

Learning from teacher-researchers now

Ever since I entered the academy, I have continued to learn from collaborative research with classroom teachers and school leaders. I have always been interested in the differential effects of the enacted curriculum, classroom discourse, and pedagogical practices on
different students. And I have always been interested in documenting the work of teachers who were making a sustained and positive difference to students’ learning in schools situated in areas of high poverty and/or cultural diversity. I have written about their work in numerous places and encouraged teachers to publish in their own right (Comber, 2005; Comber, 2007).

Here I consider what being a teacher-researcher right now entails. I draw on a range of current projects to give a sense of the possible dilemmas and the pay-offs. Clearly teachers in Australia, and beyond, are grappling with particular policy ensembles, including international testing and league tables, high-stakes national testing, national curriculum, regional priorities and performance targets, marketisation of the school, and the implementation of teacher standards. Teachers in schools located in areas of high poverty are likely to be involved in school review and reform. Teachers located in some rural, regional and remote areas may also have issues with respect to recruitment and retention of teachers. Many early-career teachers are also dealing with the difficulty of finding ongoing employment, rather than relief teaching or short-term contracts. Some teachers may be teaching subjects which they have not studied at university level. While there is always a mix of policy in any era, this particular set may impact on teachers’ work conditions in new ways and reduce the time (and ‘brain power’, to use Boomer’s term) available for teachers to engage in research. Notwithstanding these challenges and perhaps sometimes in response to such circumstances, some teachers continue to volunteer to participate in teacher research investigating the teaching of English literacy.

**New literacy demands in the middle years: Change-ready innovative teachers**

In a recent ARC Linkage, *New Literacy Demands: Learning from Classroom Design Experiments*, undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Education and Child Development and the Australian Education Union, in South Australia, we worked with teacher-researchers in the middle years of primary and secondary schooling (Years 4–9) to investigate how they could support their students with the particular and changing literacy demands of this stage of schooling – incorporating subject-specific language and discourses, new communication and information technologies, and extended learning projects across the curriculum and over time. This project aimed to recruit ‘change-ready’ teachers who were prepared to experiment with innovative pedagogies and new technologies in ways that were designed around theory and teacher knowledge of their students and the curriculum. In the first year, we worked with primary school teacher-researchers investigating the literacies of science, youth cultures and ICTs, and place-conscious pedagogies. Several teachers had already developed ‘inquiry dispositions’ through multiple engagements in research across their careers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The university researchers supported all teachers to conduct classroom design experiments (Cobb et al., 2003) to ascertain how particular theoretically-informed changes they had decided to make to their curriculum and pedagogy impacted on student learning. In the second year, also using classroom design experiments, we worked with high school teachers of Science, Mathematics, English, History, ESL, and Drama to explore how various forms of explicit teaching of subject-specific literate practices made a difference to student learning and their capacities to demonstrate that learning.

These ‘design experiments’ are not unlike action research in the sense that teachers decide an area of student learning which they want to improve and make changes to curriculum and pedagogy in order to meet those goals. Design experiments are informed by theories of learning and involve teachers collecting base-line data on students’ current understandings and performance before conducting the intervention. Teachers carry out the changed practices and then collect another set of class data in order to check whether students’ understandings and performance have improved. There is not space here to discuss the individual projects teachers conducted (but see Morgan, 2013). Here I want to consider the extent to which this project was able to produce the kinds of conditions teachers need to conduct research.

It became very clear to us that teachers and school teams who volunteer to participate are central to collaborative research. As the project unfolded, teachers whose leadership teams actively supported their participation in the research were able to engage wholeheartedly and with the assumption that their work might inform colleagues. Teachers, none of whom had conducted classroom research before, needed a lot of support to define their focus/problem/question, design their study, collect relevant data, analyse the data and prepare to present to teacher colleagues, and indeed in some cases write a report of their research. Teachers do not automatically know how to do action research...
or indeed design experiments. They need to build research repertoires. It is not yet part of their legacy from teacher pre-service education.

The ideal situation for supporting teachers to undertake such work included in-school support from peers and leadership, departmental educator support, university researcher support, and actively involved and informed student researchers or informants. Support includes the leadership team and departmental educators conveying the message that this is an important part of their work as teachers, and providing time, resources and specific expertise in order to undertake a well-designed serious project – and to see it through to analysis, publication and dissemination. This is not just time to conduct the classroom aspects of the project but also involves long lead-time (for reading, planning, design) and long follow-up (for analysis, interpretive work). One of the ongoing challenges for helping schools become sites of action research is that educational calendars and timetables are not designed for continuity and long-term arrangements, but rather for lessons, weeks, terms, and so on. There is always a sense of fragmentation, especially in high schools where some teachers teach a class for only one semester. Similarly, systems are subject to short-term funding and considerable role and personnel change was exposed by the three-year duration of the research. Yet the support of central policy and curriculum personnel is key at times of large-scale change. Some of the teachers wanted to know that their work was at least consistent with the trends in the Department, and that it might therefore be useful to other educators. In other words, the teachers wanted their research to contribute to learning and practice, and not only in the immediate classroom context. If it was worth doing, it should inform future practice more widely. This was difficult in schools where the leadership team took little interest, and also in the context of wider policy change centrally. Teacher research can be marginalised not only by academia, but also by school and departmental peers, especially in times where it appears that it is only ‘big data’ that count.

I do not want to suggest that these constraints and limits detracted from what the teacher-researchers achieved. Not at all! All participating teachers were able to design classroom experiments whereby their students’ learning demonstrably improved in the areas the teachers were targeting – including understanding of scientific and mathematical language, understanding the rules of film-making, improved confidence and competence in asking questions, improved use of nominalisation in history writing, improved understanding of search engines and referencing conventions in academic writing, and more. This array of learning goals indicates that they tackled some of the key literacy demands facing learners in the middle years. My comments are intended to draw out implications from this work for facilitating teacher research at the present time. The over-arching research design of this project sought to recruit ‘change-ready innovative teachers’. In some cases, this was achieved without difficulty due to existing long-term relationships between the university researchers, key departmental personnel and teacher-researchers. However for various reasons this was not possible to sustain as the project proceeded, changes of staff occurred, and so on. Teachers in some schools were recruited for more pragmatic reasons. Teachers who may have been cajoled into participating were perhaps less enthusiastic. As Boomer points out about learning, there is a problem if one has not been part of the negotiating of the curriculum. The same is true for collaborative research. Make it compulsory (and at the same time supplementary to the core work) and risk losing its value.

Educational leadership and turn around literacy pedagogies: School ethnographies and teacher-researchers
The second project I discuss briefly here is a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (ARC) in collaboration with the Department of Education and Child Development, SA. We are exploring emerging forms of ‘educational leadership’ in schools located in high-poverty contexts and the effects on school culture, pedagogy and student literacy learning. The first phase of the project involved interviews with around twenty primary school principals of schools situated in low SES areas about their work as leaders, their communities, and in particular their approaches to improving literacy learning in their school. The next phase involved ethnographic studies by university researchers of the leadership practices in each of four schools as those practices relate to literacy learning improvement. We have work-shadowed the principals, interviewed the principals and their leadership teams, and also volunteer teachers, and we are now at the point of working with volunteer teacher-researchers to investigate how the school agreements about literacy play out in the everyday life of the classroom and how those practices are making a difference to the learning
of different children. We are supporting the teachers to conduct case-studies of students whom they select and whose parents are in agreement. We are also ensuring the children are comfortable with the research.

Again without going into detail about the wider study here, I wish to focus on the teacher-researchers. And in doing this, I will refer only to the school where I am located as an ethnographer. The school is in one of the very poorest areas of northern Adelaide and subject to intergenerational poverty. The principal is experienced and has previously worked in similar schools where he has a reputation for improving the culture, the learning of teachers and students, and relationships with the wider community. We have joined him at a time where he is working to turn around a history of low performance and low morale, as reported in a departmental review of the school before he was appointed. It is comparatively early days and he sees the school as a ‘work in progress’. This is important because it means there is overt recognition of the need to improve, which has been followed up with high levels of support for teachers in the form of mentoring and coaching. For instance, the Assistant Principal: Literacy Improvement has regular one-on-one ‘literacy chats’ with individual teachers, where each teacher gets the opportunity to report on their literacy learning targets for students (set by the teachers themselves on the basis of data/analysis), what’s going well, and where they’d like help, advice, modelling, resources and so on. In this context, it was very interesting for me to note that when we called for volunteer teachers to participate in the research, all six were in their first few years of teaching. Only two of these were in ongoing positions. The other four teachers were on short-term contracts due to finish at the end of 2013. The principal is trying to recruit teachers who want to work in this school, who are not daunted by the challenges that go with teaching in low SES communities, who respect the children and their families, and who are keen to learn. As permanent positions become available, he will encourage them to apply. These early career teachers really want to learn.

All six volunteer teacher-researchers were eager to begin their classroom inquiries as soon as I arrived at the school, and perhaps a little deflated that I needed to complete other phases of the project before we could design the classroom projects. During my visits to the school, I spoke with them informally in the staff room, sat in on their literacy chats where possible, and visited their classrooms informally during Terms 1–3. I began observing more formally in classrooms in Term 4 of 2013. I was impressed by the honesty and openness of these young teachers. They were keen to say where they were struggling and actively sought advice from each other, the assistant principal, a literacy coach who was working part-time in the school, and also from me. The school leadership team also openly acknowledged the achievements they were making; for example, positioning one of the young teachers as an expert/learner in trialling and teaching her peers about the use of class sets of new laptop tablets; another as expert in guided reading; another as expert in conducting running records and so on. Hence the strengths of the teachers were recognised even as they were given permission to not know how to accomplish all of the practices the school literacy agreements required. They were supported over time to learn the practices they needed.

In terms of the kind of school Boomer wished for, where everyone would be undertaking research and everyone would be learning, this school seems well positioned to make such a move in terms of the willingness of these early-career teachers. There was nothing to be complacent about and a sense of urgency about making a difference to the learners. That young teachers on contract were prepared to so openly admit challenges and be ready to investigate the effectiveness (and otherwise) of their teaching spoke volumes for the kind of culture under construction in the school at this time. These teachers reported, too, their strong desire to continue working at the school. This is a school where action research could very meaningfully be woven into the ways it goes about its ongoing reform processes. In some sense, teachers setting learning targets and regularly reporting in the literacy chats means that key parts of the inquiry process are already in place. As the volunteer teacher-researchers undertake their case-studies, it will be important to think about how their learning and those of the students can best be shared.

*Ethical leadership: A collaborative investigation of equity-driven evidence-based school reform*

The final study to which I refer here is a current ARC Linkage grant being undertaken in partnership with the Queensland Educational Leaders Institute and six Queensland state schools. The research team is investigating what constitutes ethical leadership and how schools can generate local and inclusive solutions to the specific challenges they face. In particular, we are exploring how principals and leadership teams
use data as evidence to inform the decisions they make about priorities and practices in order to achieve equity in an era of accountability. Members of the research team are working closely with school leaders to understand and document their practices, and other members of the team are collaborating with volunteer teacher-researchers to undertake collaborative action research on ways in which they are aiming to enhance student learning. The collaborating schools include five high schools located in regional areas of Queensland and one city primary school. Here I draw on some trends emerging in the action research being designed and conducted in two of the high schools.

One long-term challenge faced by high school teachers is how and when to teach the literacy requirements of their subject-areas. With NAPLAN results now figuring in the public domain, there is more pressure than ever for high school educators to take literacy seriously. And they do! Boomer always knew that the assessment tail wags the curriculum dog. The exciting trend in two of the cooperating schools in this study is that teacher-researchers have volunteered from across the subject-areas. In one high school, we have representation from Design and Technology, History, Maths, Science, and English teachers. Teachers are working with classes from Year 7 to Year 11. As the teachers hear each other describe the ‘problems’ they wish to focus on, their students, their data and their plans for the intervention, they begin to get excited and share ideas about pedagogy more broadly. For example, questions about feedback and modelling are relevant to all, but play out differently in the different subjects. These conversations about learning are incredibly rich. It is clear that the teachers are hungry for this kind of talk. They listen to each other, ask questions, make suggestions, and appear to re-energise each other. The energy comes from making discoveries about students – individuals and groups – which allow teachers to refine their teaching. They go away with plans that have been enriched by their colleagues. The implication for me is that action research projects are typically funded short-term as part of particular projects. It is not built into teachers’ work. My hope is that teachers develop researcher dispositions through their engagement in such projects that they take with them into their daily work (Comber, 2006); studying teacher-researchers longitudinally remains a research project I would like to undertake.
research, there's a sense of 'no pretence' or 'telling it like it is'. Because action research begins with the teacher’s assessment of the problem or question they want to explore, there is permission to be 'truthful', to be 'critical', but there's also, as part of the research or inquiry, an opening up to seeing things *differently*. These are key moves in teachers learning from their practice – key moves in doing research.

Yet the relationships between teachers and research, teachers and knowledge production, teachers and researchers remain under-investigated. When I hear comments that teachers are assessment-illiterate or data-illiterate, and I do hear these comments, I wonder how we have managed to produce teachers who feel, or indeed perhaps are, ignorant when it comes to interpreting data. How can this be? Perhaps the problem of ‘elsewhereness’ is impacting the teachers. Yet, the teacher-researchers with whom I have had (and still have) the privilege to work have taught me a great deal. I hope that our learning relationships are reciprocal. I couldn’t do my job well without learning from school-based educational researchers. It wouldn’t feel ‘fair dinkum’. However, in Australia we are a long way still from building action research into our university preparation for teachers, and it is still not built into their everyday professional work as teachers. There is more work to do so that there is space in schools to enable teachers and students to produce knowledge, and not to assume that knowledge production is done elsewhere. Many schools still struggle to be learning institutions in the ways Boomer imagined.

Given that undertaking action research remains extra to teachers’ expanding workloads, rather than built into everyday practice, why would they bother? For me, and many of the teacher-researchers I work with, the answer is about an over-riding concern for social justice (see also Ainscow, Dyson & West, 2012). Despite the ideal that education should give everyone a fair go, it is clear that educational institutions continue to privilege those who are already privileged. The desire to make a difference is common to many educators; yet how to make it happen in the context of disparate living conditions, family and school resources, student learner dispositions, is complex and confronting. In order to sustain innovation and commitment to social justice through education, teachers need inquiry communities, opportunities for serious professional learning (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008), where they can experiment with alternative ways of engaging diverse students with complex learning over time and thereby build durable learner dispositions and educational trajectories – a ‘fair dinkum’ learning legacy.

So what’s to be done? Those of us who work in teacher education and educational research – pre- and in-service – can work to make the time and space in our programs and projects to help teachers assemble research repertoires as part of their professional knowledge and capabilities. Our graduates should know how to read research, what constitutes data, and how to interpret it. They should leave our classrooms feeling like that they have the wherewithal to learn and to negotiate learning communities. We need to keep the conversations open and active with our colleagues in central and regional offices and in schools. We need to collectively re-imagine what ‘fair dinkum’ learning might be in different school communities.

**Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Bill Green for his suggestion that I re-read *Fair Dinkum Teaching and Learning* (Boomer, 1985), especially the chapter on ‘Addressing the Problem of Elsewhereness’. I would also like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of the anonymous reviewer.

**Notes**

1. *New literacy demands in the middle years: learning from design experiments* was an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (No. LP0990692) between the Queensland University of Technology and the University of South Australia, The University of Sydney, The Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS)(SA) and the Australian Education Union (AEU) SA Branch. Chief investigators were Barbara Comber (Queensland University of Technology), Peter Freebody (The University of Sydney) and Helen Nixon (Queensland University of Technology). Partner investigator was Victoria Carrington (University of East Anglia, UK). UniSA Research Fellow was Anne-Marie Morgan (now at the University of New England).

2. *Educational Leadership and Turnaround Literacy Pedagogies* is an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (No. LP120100714) between the University of South Australia and the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (DECD). The Project is being under taken between 2012 – 2014. The chief investigators are Robert Hattam, Lyn Kerkham and Bill Lucas (University of South Australia), Barbara Comber (Queensland University of Technology) and Deb Hayes (University of Sydney). The views expressed in this paper are those of the author only.

3. *Ethical Leadership: A collaborative investigation of equity-driven evidence-based school reform* is an Australian
Research Council (ARC) Linkage project (no. LP12000647). This project involves collaborative work between researchers at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), six Queensland schools and the Queensland Educational Leadership Institute being undertaken between 2013 and 2015. The Chief Investigators are Lisa Ehrich, Barbara Comber, Val Klenowski, Suzanne Carrington and Judy Smeed (QUT) and Mel Ainscow (University of Manchester). Research Associate is Jessica Harris and Research Associate/PhD student is Nerida Spina. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors only and are not representative of the views of the Australian Research Council or the Queensland Educational Leadership Institute.

References


Barbara Comber is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology. She is interested in literacy education and social justice. Publications include the *International Handbook of Research in Children’s Literacy, Learning and Culture* (Hall, Cremin, Comber & Moll, 2013), *Literacies in Place: Teaching environmental communications* (Comber, Cremin & Reid, 2007) and *Turn-around pedagogies: Literacy interventions for at-risk students* (Comber & Kamler, 2005). Contact Barbara at: Barbara.Comber@qut.edu.au
Negotiating the Hidden Curriculum: Power and Affect in Negotiated Classrooms

Eve Mayes
University of Sydney

Abstract: Garth Boomer’s ideas in Negotiating the Curriculum (1992a) resonate with discussions of shifting teacher and student roles and relationships in the ‘student voice’ movement. Boomer (1988) critiqued his earlier conception of power in Negotiating the Curriculum, asserting that he would ‘now like to write a book on Negotiating the Hidden Curriculum’, in which he would conduct an ethnographic ‘micro-analysis’ of the ‘moment-by-moment dance’ between teachers and students and the fluctuations in the ‘flows and ebbs of affect and primal resistance in teachers and taught’ (p. 171). This article takes up this provocation, considering a 2013 meeting of a cross-age student voice group where students, teachers and researchers collectively discussed the meanings and manifestations of the hidden curriculum through exploring Pink Floyd’s Another Brick in the Wall (Waters, 1979), other film representations of school, and their own school. Four students and I analysed a transcript from this meeting, considering the dynamics of power and affect in negotiated classrooms.

Introduction
Garth Boomer’s ideas in Negotiating the Curriculum (1992a) resonate with discussions of shifting teacher and student roles and relationships in the ‘student voice’ movement (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding & Moss, 2011). In both movements, issues of power relations have been raised, although students have rarely been included in discussions of how they perceive power relations and flows of affect in classrooms where negotiation and ‘voice’ are privileged. In this article, I give an account of a discussion with four students about a 2013 meeting of a cross-age student voice group where students, teachers and researchers collectively discussed the meanings and manifestations of the hidden curriculum. In the meeting that we discuss, Pink Floyd’s Another Brick in the Wall (Waters, 1979) became a provocation for rethinking the dynamic relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and power.

Below, I outline the points of convergence between the concepts of ‘negotiating the curriculum’ and ‘student voice’ and the questions surrounding power and affect that have emerged when educators employ these concepts. This will be followed by an introduction to the context of the meeting, my research approach, the areas of interest explored by the students, and a discussion of the students’ perspectives. The article concludes with questions raised by the students, for the reader’s further consideration.

Student voice, negotiating the curriculum and power/affect relations
Involving students in curricular decisions has a long history, including the work of Homer Lane in the 1920s, to radical movements in the 1970s, to a resurgence of interest via the school improvement movement in the mid 1990s (Fielding, 2009, p. 1). Both the student voice and negotiation movements have drawn on ideas from critical pedagogy (Apple, 1982; Freire, 1970) and progressive education (Counts, 1932/1969; Dewey, 1938) in critiquing the ‘banking model’ of education and arguing for the emancipatory potential of involving student in considerations of teaching, learning and curriculum design.1

The 2013 collaborative inquiry project that students and I discuss in this article has been framed as a ‘student voice’ initiative, although it could also be argued to be an exercise in negotiation. ‘Student voice’ is a pedagogical movement that seeks to shift the ‘locus of authority’ (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 7) in schools. The ‘role jumbling’ (Unger, 2005, in Fielding & Moss, 2011) described by student voice practitioners and researchers echoes negotiation’s problematising of the ‘eternal triangle’ of ‘[t]eacher-curriculum-student’ (Siegel & Skelly, 1992, p. 83). Student voice and negotiation advocates argue for a ‘radical collegiality’ (Fielding, 1999), where students and teachers ‘collaboratively build learning theories’ (Boomer, 1992a, p. 5).

However, questions have been asked not only about broader societal constraints in these educational efforts (Boomer, 1992b; Fielding & Moss, 2011), but also about power and emotion within inquiring classrooms. In Negotiating the Curriculum (Boomer, Lester, Onore & Cook, 1992b), contributing writers raise questions surrounding students’ responses to the invitation
to question, the ends of student participation, the inadvertent repressions within collaborative inquiries, and teacher and student emotions that are echoed in the more recent student voice literature. A selection of these questions is graphically depicted in Table 1.

While practitioners and researchers have considered these questions, it has been rare for students themselves to be included in these reflective conversations about power and emotion in collaborative inquiries. In Negotiating the curriculum, Garth Boomer advocates for teachers to ‘come clean’ with students about their purposes, strategies, power and constraints within the classroom, but this ‘coming clean’ appears to remain at the classroom level. Indeed, after the first edition, Garth Boomer critiqued his view of power in Negotiating the curriculum (1988):

I would now like to write a book on Negotiating the hidden curriculum in which I would complicate the quite simplistic mono-dimensional view of power projected in Negotiating the curriculum. (1988, p. 171)

Boomer also critiqued his relative neglect of affect in Negotiating the curriculum, asserting that the book ‘oversimplifies the question of power and largely ignores the negotiation of affection’ (1988, p. 172). In this article, I tentatively hope to explore how four students make meaning of this ‘classroom dance’ (Boomer, 1988, p. 172) of power and affect in their experiences of collaborative inquiry. I define ‘affect’ as bodily sensation and ‘emotions’ as the labelling of these sensations in discourse (Youdell, 2011, p. 48), although the distinctions between these categories blur in the students’ discussions. In speaking to students, I have considered the following questions:

- How do students conceptualise power/affect relations in discussing their experiences of collaborative inquiry?
- What do students perceive to be the hidden curriculum of settings where they can inquire into teaching, learning and the curriculum?

The collaborative inquiry

The meeting that four students and I discuss below was part of a broader collaborative inquiry at a comprehensive co-educational high school in metropolitan Sydney. This school was a pilot school for the National Partnerships for Low Socio-Economic Schools2 reform funding, and the inquiry was funded from this financial support. Since 2010, a representative group of approximately twenty students from Year 9 (and a cross-age group in 2013) has been apprenticed as co-researchers in a year-long collaborative inquiry investigating teaching, learning and curriculum. This group has become informally known as the ‘Steering Committee’. Each year students have explored their experiences of schooling, learned principles of research, conducted research inquiries within the school, analysed data and disseminated their findings (see Mayes et al., 2013; Mayes & Groundwater-Smith, 2010, 2011, 2013).3

In 2013, the students in the Steering Committee inquired into the nature of the curriculum itself, considering the impending introduction of the Australian Curriculum. Their inquiry was entitled, ‘What I’d like

---

**Table 1: Questions raised in Negotiating the Curriculum (1992) and in the student voice literature (1999–present)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of questioning</th>
<th>In Negotiating the Curriculum (1992)</th>
<th>In the student voice literature (1999–present)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ responses to the invitation to question</td>
<td>‘What happens when we invite students to challenge the authority of textbooks and teachers?’ (Boomer, 1992, p. 196)</td>
<td>‘What happens when students exercise their newfound agency in unreceptive or even hostile and dangerous contexts and relationships?’ (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 354)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ends of student participation: questioning resistance or the development of ‘responsible’ workers?</td>
<td>Is the encouragement of students to be ‘shareholders in the company’ just a more subtle way of coopting the workers?’ (Green, 1992, p. 3)</td>
<td>Do these initiatives encourage students to ‘constitute themselves as active, responsible and choosing subjects’, thereby ‘harnessing them to broader educational objectives?’ (Bragg, 2007, p. 355)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The inadvertent repressions within collaborative inquiries</td>
<td>‘In what ways do we get in our own way and undermine our students’ participation in curriculum negotiation?’ (Boomer, Lester, Onore &amp; Cook, 1992a, p. 52)</td>
<td>‘How might speaking up and out be constrained by the context? […] What is being said by bodies rather than through speech acts?’ (Thomson, 2011, pp. 28–29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and student emotion in teaching, learning and reflecting</td>
<td>‘How do we [teachers] sound when confronting dissonance in and discomfort around our teaching?’ (Boomer et al., 1992a, p. 48)</td>
<td>‘To what degree are the principle of equal value and the dispositions of care felt reciprocally and demonstrated through the reality of daily encounter?’ (Fielding, 2001, p. 134)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the ethnographic fieldnotes that I had written based on an audio recording: my explanation of the concept of the hidden curriculum, and the viewing and discussion of Another Brick in the Wall as a whole group. I invited students in the Steering Committee to volunteer to reflect and analyse with me the power and emotion at work in this earlier meeting. I was explicit about my purpose: I was writing a piece of work about negotiating the curriculum for a practitioner/researcher journal, and hoped to include students' perspectives in my writing. Four students volunteered: two Year 10 girls (Mia and Bella), one Year 10 boy (Christian) and one Year 9 boy (Isaac).

The discussion with the students was semi-structured, with three questions for discussion (see Table 3). I asked students what they remembered from the meeting. After discussing their ‘raw’ memories, students individually read an account of the introduction to the concept of the hidden curriculum from my fieldnotes. In reading these fieldnotes (themselves a representation), the aim was not to re-experience the event and the issues, but rather to co-construct new understandings of power and affect in negotiation (cf. Onore & Lubetsky, 1992, p. 259). Students highlighted points of interest from this account, which we then discussed. I also engaged in ‘thinking aloud in front of students’ (Boomer, 1992, p. 8), sharing my own discomfort about my amount of talking/direction of the group. I aimed to make these ‘confessions’ to invite them to be ‘teaching [and researching] apprentices’ rather than burdening them (Boomer, 1992, p. 96).

The conversation wandered at times into discussions of other classrooms, school policies and class streaming, to learn’. They explored the construction of the curriculum documents and faculty units of work, the relationship between the given and the hidden curriculum, interviewed teachers about their views on the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, observed a faculty meeting planning a new unit of work, visited another school to observe lessons and conduct interviews and focus groups with students and teachers about the curriculum, and analysed and disseminated their findings in a variety of forums (Mayes et al., 2013). Throughout the project, they considered and debated whether students should be involved in curriculum design, and strategies for including student perspectives at the levels of the classroom, faculty, school and curriculum bodies.

Research approach

When reading Boomer’s assertion of his desire to write a book entitled Negotiating the hidden curriculum, I was reminded of a Steering Committee meeting earlier this year, where students were introduced to the concept of the hidden curriculum (Anyon, 1980; Giroux, 1983). In this meeting, 25 students, one teacher, one student teacher and two researchers collectively discussed the meanings and manifestations of the hidden curriculum through analysing Pink Floyd’s Another Brick in the Wall (Waters, 1979) as a group, before analysing the hidden curriculum in other film and visual representations of school and their own school in smaller groups (see Table 2). Reflecting on Boomer’s provocation, I wondered how students made meaning of that meeting.

Two months after the meeting, I selected a portion

Table 2. The ‘obvious’ curriculum and the ‘hidden’ curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of film:</th>
<th>________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What subject is being taught?</td>
<td>The students are also being taught other, ‘hidden’ things (rules about how to speak/act/live).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the students learning?</td>
<td>What are they being taught about:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
<td>How to speak?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
<td>How to behave?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
<td>How to relate to adults?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
<td>Who they are?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
<td>Their place in society?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are they responding to the subject that is being taught?</td>
<td>How are they responding to the ‘hidden’ curriculum?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
<td>How is this classroom similar to your experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>______________________</td>
<td>How is this classroom different to your experience?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
amongst other things. Students spontaneously asked questions of each other and of me, and they posed questions for the readers of this article towards the end of the conversation.

Table 3. Discussion questions with students

- What do you remember about the meeting when we started talking about the hidden curriculum?
- Highlight sentences or interactions in this account that you find interesting. Why did you highlight these sentences?
- What questions do you have about the hidden curriculum/this meeting/the interactions in this meeting?

I then transcribed this conversation and highlighted passages where students explicitly discussed power, emotion/affect, as well as passages that resonated or jarred with what I had read in Negotiating the curriculum. I narrowed these passages down to four groups that provided another perspective on the questions raised in the literature (see Table 1). Below, these transcript passages are contextualised, and then shared with minimal elision or paraphrasing, and discussed.

There are dangers and contradictions in my approach in this article that I need to ‘come clean’ about before proceeding. ‘Coming clean’ is never straightforward; it is ‘often [just as] difficult to unearth our own intentions as it is to reveal or tap into our students’ (Siegel & Skelly, 1992, p. 98). While I hoped to negotiate an account of a classroom experience of exploring curriculum with the students themselves, I do not assume that what the students say is the ‘truth’ of the situation nor their final viewpoint (Scheurich, 1997). Even while I attempt to provide the conditions where students might speak of their experiences, I constructed the research event, the fieldnotes, and this article itself. There is still the danger that I am ‘speaking for others’ (Alcoff, 1991) as the author of this article, filtering and mediating students’ words. Yet, I also consider it impossible for a ‘voice’ to speak autonomously, without mediation, set apart from others, since all ‘voices’ speak in relation to others and are bound up in the other, with traces of others present and interruptive in any utterance (cf. Butler, 2005; Ellsworth, 1989, p. 312).

With these caveats aside, the following section explores how students made meaning of the discussion of the hidden curriculum in this meeting, and their perception of the flows of power and affect in negotiated classrooms.

Students’ points of interest

Mia: How come we didn’t know there was a hidden curriculum [laughs] before this?

Mia asked this question after we had read and discussed points of interest from my account in the fieldnotes of students’ introduction to the concept of the hidden curriculum. After we had discussed these points of interest, I asked students, ‘Do you have any questions about this?’ Below is the response:

Mia: Yeah, but how come we didn’t know there was a hidden curriculum [laughs] before this? That’s why – I didn’t know there was a hidden curriculum.

Isaac: Yeah.

Mia: I literally just heard – just learned about the hidden curriculum last term when I started the Steering Committee. Before I’d just go by, class by class, and just learn it.

Eve: That’s a really interesting question. Why do you think that people haven’t told you that?

Isaac: They [teachers] want to keep it hidden?

Bella: They [students] won’t actually follow it. […] [If students] know what [teachers] expect, they might want to not want to do it to get on teacher’s nerves. […] ‘The hidden curriculum, blah blah blah.’ No one would do it. They’d find it stupid. […] If someone said that to me, I’d be like, ‘what the hell?’ Why are you treating me like a baby for?’

Mia: Yeah true.

Isaac: Yeah.

Mia: There’re just some things that you just have to do.

Mia’s question reminded me of Jon Cook’s simile in Negotiating the curriculum: ‘too often […] students, like sprouting mushrooms, are kept in the dark’ (Cook, 1992, p. 19). Yet, while Cook downplays the effects of ‘coming clean’, asserting that students will accept the teacher’s desires and constraints once they are ‘recognised and understood’ (Cook, 1992, p. 19), Bella’s response to my question about why people hadn’t told them about the hidden curriculum intimated otherwise. I interpret Bella’s words as suggesting that students might abuse the teacher’s trust of them in imparting ‘secret’ knowledge: ‘they might want to not want to do it to get on teacher’s nerves’. This signalling to latent chaos in the negotiated classroom echoes Boomer’s question: ‘What happens when we invite students to challenge the authority of textbooks and teachers?’ (Boomer, 1992, p. 196). The students’ response to Mia’s provocation also indicates that the teacher’s desire to ‘apprentice’ students into the ‘secret knowledge’ of the hidden curriculum might
be unwelcome to some. Students may prefer to just accept that ‘[t]here’s just some things that you just have to do,’ consciously choosing a more conservative location based on their view of schools and teacher and student roles. Students may even feel patronised by the teacher’s ‘coming clean’ (‘Why are you treating me like a baby for?’) rather than welcoming this new perspective, perhaps, if they feel that such a ‘coming clean’ does not honestly appraise the power relations that allow a teacher’s confession to be such a novelty. Their responses suggest the unpredictability of negotiated classroom interactions; the potential for ‘fluctuations in the balance of power, a shifting drama of point and counterpoint, changing patterns of initiation and response’ (Boomer, 1988, p. 171) even in attempts to ‘enlighten’ students through explicit discussion of hidden curriculum(s).

**Christian:** Would you prefer to have questions given to you when you’re not thinking, you don’t feel like it has anything to do with you, or would you rather something that takes time, but by the end you feel involved and a part of something bigger?

Following Mia’s question (above), I asked students their perceptions of the previous day’s Steering Committee meeting. Students had been invited during this meeting to write their own research questions (to shape their subsequent analysis of data from their previous interviews of teachers and other observations) on a post it note, narrow these down with a partner, and then narrow these questions down again in a group of four. This exercise had ended up taking a double period (1 ½ hours) and other scheduled exercises had to be deferred. Mia and Isaac responded to my question about how they felt about constructing their own research questions:

**Mia:** That [exercise] was really cool. I thought it was really good because it gave us an opportunity to ask whatever – it was kind of like a free thing to do. I thought it gave the students a chance to open up. Usually the questions are always there for us and we have to answer them. This time we were asking the questions. It was kind of cool asking the questions and wanting to research about it later.

**Isaac:** That was fun, but I think it took a lot of time. We went over the time that was planned. I think that’s why we don’t do it – we only do it occasionally. […] Cause the teacher usually plans everything, and gathers all the information and gives it to us. If we were to make up the questions, it usually takes longer for us, cause we have to think of the question, we have to think of why we want it to be answered.

Isaac pointed to the constraints of time, and suggests that the teacher is more efficient in gathering information and distributing it to students. This echoes concerns that have been raised about time constraints on teachers (Cook, 1992, pp. 18–19) and the tyrannies of the timetable. However, Christian then challenged Isaac’s concern with his own question:

**Christian:** [to Isaac] Would you prefer to have questions given to you when you’re not thinking, you don’t feel like it has anything to do with you, or would you rather something that takes time, but by the end you feel involved and a part of something bigger? […]

**Isaac:** I like to be a part – to be involved in the questions. But I’m saying in the teacher’s point of view, a teacher would prefer to plan more than for us to make the questions, because it’s easier for her to teach. […]

**Eve:** So it could take more time. What do you think Christian?

**Christian:** […] Things that take time tend to be more effective –

**Isaac:** Yeah.

**Christian:** People feel like, ‘alright, I spent this time on this, it has some of my ideas and contributions, so it means something to me.’ So I’m going to give 100% or a lot more if I would than I would if Bella had just given me […] a bunch of words on a paper. That has nothing to do with me. They’d ask you the questions and say, ‘give me answers.’ I’m not thinking. I don’t – might not even care. I might write down exactly what you say and say exactly how you say it with no emotion or anything. But it won’t connect with me unless I felt I’ve actually contributed. And that’s the thing with most people, they don’t know – they’ll say they prefer getting questions, but they don’t know they’ll feel more appreciated if they actually put effort into it.

Christian’s words echo Jon Cook’s ‘ownership principle: people tend to strive hardest for things they wish to own, or to keep and enhance things they already own’ (1992, p. 15). Yet, while there is some resonance here, I read Christian’s description of ownership as not as individualistic as Cook’s ownership principle. Christian made a connection between the learner’s crafting of questions and being ‘a part of something bigger.’ Christian suggested his agency in choosing to respond to the invitation to craft questions, a connection between ‘effort’ and connection to learning, constituting himself as an active and responsible subject when he perceives the broader educational objectives to align with the self that he is forming in conjunction with his teachers and peers.

Christian also alludes to an affective dimension to inquiry, arguing that questions given by the teacher
might result in writing a response ‘with no emotion’, while learning would ‘connect with me’ if he has contributed to their formation. He linked ‘thinking’ with ‘car[ing], contrib[ution] with subjectivity (‘connect with me’), ‘effort’ in forming questions with ‘appreciation.’ This description suggests flows between forming one’s own questions and forming the self as an engaged learner; forming an emotional connection to subject matter and forming a sense of appreciation in and for learning. Forming one’s own questions transforms subject matter from ‘a bunch of words on a paper’ into knowledge that is intimately connected to the learner’s emotions, subjectivity and sense of connection to ‘something bigger’. Yet, Christian also asserted that ‘most people’ ‘don’t know’ that this level of emotional engagement is possible because their previous experience has predominantly involved passively ‘getting questions.’

Isaac: I think if you were to put three classes in the library and just divide it, put tables, and pretend that they’re teaching something, as soon as you go past that line, it feels different.

The conversation later moved into discussion of the atmospheres constructed in different classrooms. Christian spoke of a ‘certain different atmosphere’ that he senses ‘when you walk into a classroom straight away.’ Christian described Ms Frazzle’s classroom, where ‘students might feel I actually want to learn and I’d feel she’s not going to go off like that every second’ and another classroom where ‘I would feel like kind of restricted’ because of the teacher’s ‘very dominant manner.’ Christian and Isaac then analysed the conditions of Ms Frazzle’s classroom:

Christian: [...] She has a lot of students. But the thing is, she’s not always trying to say, ‘I’m in charge, and we’re going to do this and then this.’ Although like [Bella] said before, there’s not enough time to talk or to go, ‘we go way back.’ But what she does, she moves around a lot, and she’ll talk to this group –

Isaac: She’ll go from table to table.

Christian: She’ll go to this table and have a laugh and the next table to check on them, and that creates an atmosphere of students actually feeling connected to the teacher. Because if I don’t feel connected to the teacher I’m supposed to be learning from, I’m not going to pay attention.

Isaac: Yeah. I think if you were to put three classes in the library and just divide it, put tables, and pretend that they’re teaching something, as soon as you go past that line, it feels different. You don’t know why, but it just does.

Christian: I think it changes on the atmosphere that the teacher creates.

Isaac: Yeah, how the teacher talks and how she interacts with you, it’s different.

The creation of an atmosphere is connected to the teacher’s bodily movement through the room. As I read through Christian’s description of how Ms Frazzle ‘moves’ through the room, I envisage an almost tangible movement of affect around the room, in the laughter, in the ‘different’ patterns of speech and interaction. I can almost see visible lines of connection constructed around the room between teacher and student. Isaac took this almost tangible description of affect in classrooms a step further, describing a hypothetical situation where three classrooms worked in the library, with tables (rather than walls) marking the domains of different classrooms. He described how, ‘as soon as you go past that line, it feels different. You don’t know why, but it just does.’ There is an element of mystery in how classroom ‘atmospheres’ are constructed, although they sense that it has something to do with ‘how the teacher talks and how she interacts with you’.

However, the students did not only present a mono-dimensional view of classroom power relations, where the ‘dominant’ teacher creates a classroom atmosphere that students must passively endure, and the negotiating teacher ‘frees’ students from such constraints. In the midst of the discussion of power and affect in classrooms, Bella interjected:

Bella: Sometimes I reckon that the students have more power over the teacher. […]

Isaac: The numbers. The number of students in class – a student can attack a teacher. They can literally attack a teacher with words or make a teacher unconfident and like take it out of a safety zone and make her get scared.

Bella then described a lesson where ‘kids [were] screaming at each other’, and two teachers in the classroom ‘couldn’t do anything.’ Bella said, ‘They were just sitting there and they kept on getting intimidated by the students. And the teacher said, ’I can’t do this no more.’’ Christian responded:

Christian: That’s the students with too much power. […]

The teacher in [Another Brick in the Wall] was too dominant which was taking the experience of learning away from students. Whereas what Bella was explaining, the teacher was too lenient and not dominant enough – what the teacher was doing didn’t build up an expectation of the students at all. So they got to take over which is, and can be a very negative thing.

Their description here suggests that the atmosphere
of the classroom is co-constructed. Students’ responses to ‘lenient’ teaching construct other potential emotions in the teacher: students’ ‘screaming’, and teachers’ intimidation, paralysis and defeat. The over-dominance of any party in the construction of affective flows in the classroom is perceived to be ‘a very negative thing’ by the students.

**Bella: We’re opening up. Telling you what we think, what happened in class, not what we think – what actually happens in class, and youse are getting ideas.**

Towards the end of the conversation, I attempted to further ascertain students’ responses to my perception that I had dominated the initial discussion introducing the hidden curriculum or had ‘forced’ a definition of it on students. I was wanting to question with them, ‘In what ways do we get in our own way and undermine our students’ participation in curriculum negotiation?’ (Boomer, 1988, p. 172). I asked whether they had perceived that it was a problem that I spoke a lot early in the meeting when introducing the concept of the hidden curriculum. Isaac responded:

*Isaac:* You were showing us the path. You were doing what a teacher is supposed to do. She’s leading us and she’s telling us, ‘go this way’ –

*Christian:* But she’s not going to pull you back if you go down.

*Isaac:* ‘Go this way and that will help you.’ There are some teachers who don’t give you the path that you’re supposed to be going through. And that creates disastrous [consequences]. [...] There are some teachers that see bullying going on in class, and they don’t do anything about it. They turn their eye. When something is happening that [students are] not supposed to be doing, they turn their eye.

*Eve:* What about the teacher in *Another Brick in the Wall*: the dominant teacher? If I show you the path, and there’s another teacher who doesn’t even show the path, what’s the teacher in [that film clip] doing?

*Isaac:* He’s showing the path, but at an extent that he shouldn’t be.

*Bella:* It’s more embarrassing.

*Isaac:* The path that he’s showing is not as efficient –

*Bella:* He just wants to make it embarrassing for [the student].

*Isaac:* The teacher’s benefitting. He’s creating laughter. [...] *Christian:* It’s not for someone else.

Isaac initiated an analogy of a path to describe the distinctions between different forms of teaching. The teacher who negotiates shows ‘the path’, leading and telling students about the path without ‘pull[ing] you back if you go down’. Potential directions are suggested and possible consequences are highlighted and forewarned, without mandating how the student should proceed. In reading this, I imagined a park ranger with a map, telling campers their options, handing over the map, for the campers to choose and experiment with multiple paths and points of entry and exit. Isaac contrasted showing ‘the path’ with teachers ‘who don’t give you the path that you’re supposed to be going through’. Initially interpreting this analogy in terms of subject content, I was surprised when Isaac continued by describing this loose direction in terms of peer relations and affect – the teacher seeing bullying and ‘turn[ing] their eye’ away from it, allowing for unrestricted, destructive flows of power and affect between students. The image of this classroom encounter reminded me of Boomer’s ‘negotiation of affection’ (Boomer et al., 1992a, p. 48). In the teacher’s ‘turn’ of ‘their eye’, their physical distancing from a student’s emotional and relational circumstances, the ‘path’ is lost; the student’s affection for a teacher evaporates. The line of affect between student and teacher is fractured in the moment that the teacher distances her/himself from connection to the flows of power and emotion between students in a classroom. Yet, the students also discussed the possibility of over-direction of ‘the path’ and the affective consequences of this stance. The ‘dominant’ teacher ‘showing the path’ ‘at an extent that he shouldn’t be’ was associated by Bella and then by Isaac with emotion: embarrassment and the stimulation of jeering laughter. Both the ‘lenient’ teacher and the ‘dominant’ teacher were associated with negative emotions: the anguish of a student whose subjection to bullying by a peer is ignored, and the embarrassment of a student who is fixed with the scornful gaze and words of an adult.

I continued to question them about what they perceived to be the hidden curriculum of the Steering Committee:

*Eve:* What do you think you’re being taught in [the Steering Committee] about how to speak? [...] *What are the hidden messages that are happening about how to speak?*

*Bella:* We’re opening up. Telling you what we think, what happened in class, not what we think – what actually happens in class, and youse are getting ideas.

*Christian:* We have to respect – the respect comes in every class. You’ve got to respect what everyone’s saying. In the Steering Committee it feels like you have more of a
say and they’re actually going to listen to you. Instead of saying, ‘oh I listen’ and actually ‘blah blah blah’. Unlike the Steering Committee, you know it’s going to take into consideration every single word that you say –

Bella: Like you typed all this [waves paper with fieldnotes]. Usually this wouldn’t be for nothing.

Eve: What does this [detailed transcription of the meeting] signal to you?

Isaac: = You care

Bella: That = you care.

Christian: = That you care and you’re paying attention to what we’re saying.

Bella: Man, I wouldn’t even be bothered to do that. [The three students laugh] […]

Isaac: When you told us about the hidden curriculum, the whole point is to inform us about why it exists and how teachers are teaching it to us, so youse are informing us about how to react when the teacher tries to teach us the hidden curriculum and why it’s being taught.

Christian: The thing is, it’s actually making us think as well, about […] how we can help them to improve our learning. It’s not always about what the teacher says goes, but they have certain schedules to stick to so we should learn that. So it’s about us trying to work with them to make it better for both –

Isaac: Both sides.

Once again, the ‘hidden messages’ of the negotiated classroom were not tied to content, but to emotion and relations. Bella said that the students ‘were opening up’, and described what I perceived to be a reciprocal exchange happening between adults and students: ‘telling you what we think’ and ‘youse are getting ideas’. Christian described a sense of ‘respect’, associating this with being ‘every single word’ being listened to in the encounter. Bella took this a step further, picking up and waving the paper of fieldnotes with a projection of my emotion: ‘you care.’ Christian extended this to extrapolate what the artefact of the fieldnotes signaled, which I interpreted in terms of the relational exchange at work in our negotiation of this account: ‘you’re paying attention to what we’re saying’. Their responses remind me of one of Fielding’s (2001, p. 134) questions about the conditions for student voice in schools (and perhaps also in research): ‘To what degree are the principle of equal value and the dispositions of care felt reciprocally and demonstrated through the reality of daily encounter?’

At the same time as students gestured towards positive flows of power and affect in negotiated classrooms, I wonder about the power/knowledge relations at work in this interaction itself as we co-constructed an account of their experience of the Steering Committee meeting. I wonder to what extent students felt the need to affirm the neutrality of the power relations at work in the Steering Committee to me, or to give positive feedback to boost my ‘self esteem’ when I had made myself vulnerable to their critique. In explicitly asking them about whether I had talked too much, did I appear to need their affirmation? When I consciously admitted my anxiety surrounding my pedagogical actions, how did they perceive this vulnerability? As Boomer asked, ‘How do we sound when confronting dissonance in and discomfort around our teaching?’ (1992a, p. 48).

Conclusion

I am self-conscious as I write this article; aware that I have given you a glimpse into my attempts to ‘pursue ideals in the jungles of conflicted practice’ (Boomer, 1992, p. 91). I have written with Boomer’s assumption that ‘we learn most in areas of our greatest ‘anxiety’ (in the sense of disequilibrium rather than paralysing fear); that ‘vulnerability and speculativeness’ are generative (Boomer, 1992, p. 92). In a low socio-economic school setting, vulnerability and anxiety are usually associated with behaviour difficulties and teacher attrition. But this heterogeneous group has highlighted for me the potential for transformation in moments of vulnerability and negotiation. While laying one’s pedagogy, ‘the teaching ‘self’, on the line and in doing so watch it change’ poses the ‘latent potential for disruption and chaos’, this ‘tentative pushing’ at the borders of practice also ‘gives an adrenaline surge of terror/pleasure’ that is addictive (Reid, with Thwaites, 1992, pp. 119–120).

The students’ discussion and questions resonate with questions raised by practitioners and researchers considering negotiation and student voice. Their words also add a further affective dimension to previous discussions of power in Negotiating the curriculum, integrating emotions into their descriptions of pedagogical encounters. The students expressed a hope that their questions might unsettle your own emotional state, dear reader. While writing their questions to pose to readers of this article, Isaac and Bella raised the possibilities for transformation when a teacher questions their own practices in relation to students:

Isaac: I think that the teachers might not have seen themselves teach. […]

Bella: You know what? Why don’t youse record one of the
teachers for a day and then show her?

Isaac: They unintentionally do what they’re doing. If they see what they’re doing wrong, they might fix it. But if you don’t do nothing about it, nothing’s going to happen. It might become worse.

In the spirit of ‘student voice’, I conclude with the students’ questions to readers:

• Mia: How is the hidden curriculum put into practice when you speak to individual students and assess their behaviour in the classroom?
• Christian: Have you taken into consideration the idea of creating a more balanced environment in the classroom – an area where students learn – not only when they feel like they’re learning but they actually achieve something as well?
• Bella: Do you think you are teaching well? Is there anything else youse can do to make it a better environment?
• Isaac: How would you feel if you were in our shoes?

Acknowledgements
Thanks to the editors, Susan Groundwater-Smith and Mia, Christian, Bella and Isaac for their encouraging and insightful comments on earlier drafts.

Notes
1 See Onore & Lubestky (1992, pp. 254–255) for a discussion of the literature shaping thinking in the negotiation movement; and Taylor and Robinson (2009) and Cook-Sather (2002) for a construction of the theoretical heritage informing the student voice movement. Practitioners and scholars in both movements call not only for a reconsideration of teacher/student roles and relationships at the classroom level, but also for political analyses and critiques of the organisation of schools, evaluation of students in testing regimes and the relationship between paradigms of education and broader structural inequalities (Boomer, 1992b; Fielding & Moss, 2011).

2 The Australian federal and state governments signed a National Partnerships Agreement for Low Socioeconomic schools in February 2009. This partnership aims ‘to improve student engagement, educational outcomes and wellbeing in participating schools and make inroads into entrenched disadvantage’ (Australian Government, 2013).

3 Honorary Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith has been the academic partner throughout the initiative. I facilitated the group in 2010 and 2011, and ‘Ms Frazzle’ (a pseudonym) facilitated it in 2012 and 2013. I was a participant observer of the Steering Committee throughout 2013, while undertaking ethnographic fieldwork as part of a PhD.

4 The students chose their own pseudonyms. Interestingly, these chosen pseudonyms mask the students’ cultural backgrounds. These students were from a range of academically-streamed classes. When I asked students how they would like me to describe them, Christian, Bella and Isaac resisted, saying, ‘I don’t know how to describe myself’. Mia described herself (in written format) as a ‘good, well-committed student who tries her best to achieve and likes to conduct research. She wants students to have a voice and equality between teachers and students. She believes that even if you are in the lowest class, people in all classes should be given the same opportunities’. While the students give (and withhold) some markers of their identities, they are multiply positioned across gender, social class, race and academic ranking; there are complex sites of identifications and multiple axes of inequalities that intersect and interrelate in experiences of school (Youdell, 2011).

References


Eve Mayes is an English and ESL teacher. Her doctoral work at the University of Sydney is an ethnographic study of the intersections of power, affect and subjectivities in student co-research and the complexities of measuring school reform. Contact Eve at: Eve.Mayes@det.nsw.edu.au
Addressing the ‘Essences’: Making English Teachers

Larissa McLean Davies, Martin Dickens, Ashleigh Grant, Emily Hehir, Hagan Matthews, Caitlin May, Philip Thiel, Catherine Sparrow & Glen Trevaskis, with Katherine Barton, Amelia Elliot and Trent Ogden
University of Melbourne

Abstract: Garth Boomer’s democratic and often provocative vision for English teaching continues to play an important part in the professional development of English teachers. In particular, Boomer’s work is often used by Teacher Educators in preservice degrees to introduce emerging English teachers to key ideas such as curriculum negotiation and student/teacher collaboration. Importantly, Boomer’s work encourages professional dialogue, reflecting the concept that theory and scholarship about teaching, like school English curricula, should be negotiated and debated. This is evident in many of his publications, and particularly in his 1993 article ‘How to Make a Teacher’. In this article the writers (a teacher educator and pre-service teachers) engage in a close reading of Boomer’s paper, and continue this dialogue by exploring the continued affordances of these ‘essences’ as a paradigm for English teaching in the 21st century.

Introduction: Distilling the essences (Larissa)
In the first week of February, 2013 my colleagues and I welcomed 100 preservice English teachers into our Master of Teaching program. As postgraduates, they arrived with a wealth of life experiences. Many were parents, some were writers, and others journalists or lawyers. Still others had travelled, worked for the public service, and taught English in Asia. For some, the commencement of this degree brought with it a new state or a new country, where English, and English teaching, looked and felt quite different. Yet, amidst these many differences was a common desire to ‘become’ an English teacher, and to explore this new identity in all its complexity. Many were carrying the images of their own, beloved English teachers as a kind of talisman for what might be possible; our task as English teacher educators, then, was to explore these conceptions, and in doing so, to ask ourselves anew, How do you ‘make’ an English teacher? What are the essential ingredients of a preservice English teachers’ course, in an environment dominated by NAPLAN, where the literacy (Snyder, 2008) and grammar (Locke, 2010) ‘wars’, and the newly articulated national standards for teaching (Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership), form the backdrop?

By way of introducing the complexity of English teaching, in an early lecture I shared Garth Boomer’s fictional account of what we, in our current context, might understand to be the ‘expert’ English teacher. First introduced to me by Cal Durrant, Boomer’s depiction of the imaginary English teacher ‘Mrs Bell’ serves to remind us, nearly thirty years after it was written, of the competing demands faced by English teachers, and of the vast nature of a subject that is at once aesthetic and instrumental, and unbound by clear discipline borders:

Mrs Bell is a daVinci and a Galileo. In order to practise her craft at Timbertown High School … she needs brilliant generic promiscuity. She must mix psychology, history, literature, politics, sociology, linguistics, economics, art, science, philosophy, poetics and aesthetics with passion and dispassion, with pragmatism and vision. (Boomer 1985, in Durrant, 2004, p. 7)

Boomer’s reflection served as a springboard for a discussion about the tensions and intellectual pleasure of English teaching that, over the course of the year, gathered momentum. What emerged as a theme in class discussions, at the cafe, and on social media, were the challenges of teaching English, and of supporting literacy learning for all students in a high-stakes, politically volatile environment.

A key to testing and articulating these tensions, and finding ways to address them, was discussion; this article reflects this debate, and is part of a continuing professional conversation. Inspired by Boomer’s work as an advocate, analyst and agitator of English teaching and teachers, in what follows, eleven pre-service teachers have written in response to Boomer’s 1993 article ‘How to Make a Teacher’. Boomer’s article was first delivered as an address in 1992, at the NCTE spring conference in Washington.¹ As it began as an oration, the article reads as a kind of performance, where
Boomer, as the exhorter, proposes seven ‘essences’ of English teaching: provocation, negotiation, demonstration, transformation, reflection, passion and pragmatism, terms that are familiar to those who have encountered Boomer’s work.

Yet, while these essences provide some key principles, Boomer does not offer an essentialist vision of English teaching in this piece. Rather, these principles, or concepts, are open for debate and discussion, which Boomer makes clear through the structure of the text itself. For each essence he identifies, Boomer offers a brief explanation and insight, and then adopts two additional personas – one who is an experienced and cynical English teacher, and the other more mild-mannered and receptive to his suggestions – to offer reflections on the concepts being proposed from each of these standpoints. In addition to this, Boomer also invites teacher educator and academic Wendy Morgan to offer her insights on the essences and the conceit of the article itself, as the ‘real respondent’. While, as Morgan points out, Boomer’s two respondents are stereotypical, and are cast in such a way as to position readers to be more receptive to Boomer’s extortions as they unfold (Boomer, 1993, p. 6), the conception of this piece as dialogue and debate, goes to the core of English teachers’ professional learning (Parr, 2010), this piece as dialogue and debate, goes to the core of English teaching in this piece. Rather, these principles, or concepts, are open for debate and discussion, which

Boomer’s first ‘essence’ comes as a relief to me, as I commence my career as a graduate. As a pre-service teacher I felt the classroom was not entirely my own: I was not free to create this state of this flux and challenge. On teaching rounds, my Year 8 class was working with James Moloney’s Dougly which grapples with many issues concerning Indigenous Australia. I could have used this text as a vehicle to challenge students’ beliefs and prejudices, but instead I took a safer path. Who was I, a guest in the classroom, to decide on what societal and personal challenges these students should face? Uncertain of my status in this classroom, I largely chose to protect rather that confront these students with the realities of our country. Consequently, they left the classroom with the same beliefs they walked in with; while they gained enhanced literacy skills (they read more fluently aloud and they could decipher meaning faster and more accurately), they had not been truly provoked in terms of the content of this text.

Essence 1: Provocation (Exhorter – Ashleigh)

For Boomer, learning occurs after a state of disequilibrium has been overcome (Boomer, 1993, p. 6). In light of this, he implores English teachers to provoke their students so that, through texts, they can question their beliefs and experience a state of uncertainty.

Over the course of my pre-service year, I had the opportunity to experience powerful disequilibrium when I undertook a teaching round in a remote community in North-East Arnhem Land. This left me in a state of disequilibrium where the recovery time was significant; in fact I believe I have not yet fully
recovered. English here was presented in a different way; the classrooms emphasised literacy skills and the technical aspects of English as a language. However, it was not within the classroom experiences that I had the greatest provocation as an English teacher. English is largely the exploration of stories, and the oral narratives I encountered outside the classroom challenged my thinking not just as a teacher but also as a person: I was left questioning what I value and why I value it. Having my judgment suspended in North-East Arnhem land meant that I was then free of it. Conversations became two-way as I was left open and I listened as much as I spoke. Disequilibrium and provocation, as Boomer argues, are experiences that hold value for teacher and student alike. Whilst we may not be able to travel physically to different places with our students, texts can provide the platform for uncertainty to occur and allow us to question, alongside our own values. In this textual world, aside from our own, we can discover where we stand.

Respondent (Katherine)
In teachers’ hands, texts can act as provocateurs, and provide a means through which disequilibrium can be encountered. Similarly, discussion-based pedagogy is often used to stimulate debate in the English classroom. I acknowledge the tension between provoking or challenging the prior beliefs of students, and imposing one’s own views onto them and I still wonder whose political agenda is being served if teachers are leading students into disequilibrium on matters of social justice and politics? As a feminist, I delight in asking students to question preconceived notions of gender and sexuality. I, too, wonder if it is my right (or anyone’s) to provoke students in this way? My pedagogical philosophy is in its nascence; thus I aim to seek answers to these ideological questions about English teaching as I gain experience. In this sense, I hope to have my preconceptions challenged and remain everlastinglly open to uncertainty and provocation.

Essence 2: Negotiation (Exhorter – Hagan)
I have found two easily confused notions of ‘negotiation’ at work in my short time in schools as a pre-service teacher. One is the idea of learning to negotiate the system by finding out what assessors want, and delivering. This is certainly a valuable life skill considering the bureaucratic whip-cracking that seems to lacerate most day-to-day life choices. Ultimately, though, this negotiation helps students achieve success while remaining wholly disempowered. To learn how to avoid the whip is not to have autonomy, and students know this. According to Wyn’s research, many Australian students ‘do not feel that their school education [has] prepared them very effectively to live well in changing times’ (Wyn, 2007, 36). A truly empowered student is able to dismiss the whip and assert their own agency. This empowerment is the realm of the second notion of negotiation – social negotiation – which is no means mutually exclusive but far more challenging for teachers and students.

Boomer suggests that the development of open communication provides an approach to negotiation that is empowering for students. For Boomer (1993, p. 7), social negotiation renders the teacher ‘less mysterious, less surprising’, and in doing so, I would add, makes the classroom more inclusive. Boomer’s conception of ‘the epic classroom’, which presents the curriculum as something to be critiqued and evaluated (Boomer, 1992, p. 285), provides further details about his vision of social negotiation. Central to Boomer’s concept of negotiation is the notion of authenticity. He writes, “negotiating the curriculum … is a way of being and acting which transcends technique and formula’ (Boomer, 1992, p. 278). When I consider the number of letters-to-the-editor about imaginary skate parks that I have read over the course of the year, I am reminded of the ways in which both students and teachers suffer when we engage in these ‘rehearsals of authenticity’, which are void of any kind of real, or at least comprehensible, audience (Misson, 2004, p. 37). Taking up Boomer’s challenge, in a classroom privileging negotiation, the purpose of writing a letter to the editor would made clear at the outset, avoiding surprise and disorientation, and students would be consulted about how they would like to achieve this purpose. This may seem as so simple as to be missing the point, a form of pseudo-negotiation, but the key here is not the letter to the editor, but the kinds of the thinking that are engendered in students when they see the curriculum as open for consultation.

I am yet to find a truly negotiable classroom environment in Boomer’s mold, or come close to developing one for myself. I was placed in two very different schools across the course of my pre-service year, but in both sites, English teachers were encountering the demands of high-stakes testing and the overbearing expectations that this ensures: periods were taken from Year 8 English classes to focus on NAPLAN literacy
and Year 9 and 10 English curricula were redesigned to mirror the VCE format. Boomer (1992, p. 286) points out that developing successful negotiation practices takes time, and this does seem to be the greatest obstacle in the life of many teachers, particularly in the current climate where content appears to be constantly expanding. In order to keep up with department-wide unit plans in one of my placements, I found myself constantly switching between units on language analysis and text response from period to period, sometimes splitting a double period in order to meet these aims. Naturally, the result in these circumstances is chaos, a big bang approach in which as much content as possible is jammed into an inadequate space and time, in the hope that life springs from the resultant explosion.

I don’t imagine that, as a graduate teacher, it will be easy to facilitate authentic negotiation as Boomer imagined it. I can, however, attempt to find paths through the chaos, and by making the process of doing so transparent and involving students in decision-making, I can empower my students to begin navigating these paths for themselves.

Respondent 1 (Amelia)
It is essential to propose an open dialogue with the students, steering the ship but having them look ahead as to what is on the horizon. It is important, however, not to collectively antagonise ‘the system’, as the last thing we want is a generation of defeatist cynics. Rather, we should engender a deeper sense of why these requirements are in place and how to reach the established targets creatively and in a way that fulfils the needs of the individual learner.

Essence 3: Demonstration (Exhorter – Philip)
At times Boomer’s metaphors for teaching are disarmingly sexual, as if bad teaching were a kind of perversion. Much teacher talk is ‘auto-erotic in nature’ writes Boomer as Exhorter (Boomer, 1993, p. 10); his imaginary Respondent vows never ‘to indulge in this kind of full frontal display’ (p. 11). This leaves readers with an awkward question: when Boomer counsels demonstration, just what is a teacher invited to show?

I teacher-trained in the age of Facebook. Lectures about social media were scheduled early and often, exhorting us to protect ourselves from the gaze of prospective students and employers. ‘They will Google you,’ our teachers warned as step-by-step training was given in the art of disguising our virtual selves. Such advice sits uncomfortably with Boomer’s definition of teaching as ‘a demonstration of the self, a generous invitation to students to observe how the teacher thinks, feels, understands, solves and acts’ (Boomer, 1993, p. 10). How will students follow my thinking if my Twitter feed is locked?

Boomer’s article predates social media, but its advent has only increased the resonance of his appeal, especially for teachers interested in identity formation and sites for the production and consumption of text. It was no surprise that English was the subject that paid closest attention to developments in digital communication in my teacher-training course, usefully countering what appeared to be a pure anxiety around social media that can dominate education. Following Eileen Joy (2013), I see this ‘period of unprecedented technological innovation’ as radically beneficial for the work of English teachers, who are poised to play a lead role in navigating the new terrain of online identity, including via the demonstration of their online selves. What this means professionally is a work in progress; suffice to say that there is no correlation between poor professionalism and enthusiastic social media use.

Of course Boomer’s exhortation to demonstrate also applies to more traditional forms of literary expression. Like all students of creative writing I was instructed to ‘show don’t tell.’ For Boomer, this maxim goes far beyond writing practice, though English teachers can be oddly unwilling to demonstrate even this element of themselves. Unlike teachers of piano or sculpture, English teachers do not systematically identify as practitioners of their art, despite the myriad ways in which writing can be practised in our social and professional lives. The voice of Boomer’s Respondent – ‘I’m not a very confident reader or writer’ (Boomer, 1993, p. 11) – is not as far-fetched for an English teacher as it sounds, especially when it comes to creative writing. Studies of English teachers during writing workshops have shown dangerously low levels of self-efficacy about writing (Cremin, 2006). Retrospectively, more training as a creative writer would have enhanced my sense of readiness for the profession of English teacher; and – updating Boomer – my own practice as a blogger will have concrete benefits for the students I will teach.

Sharing our writing can feel risky. Nevertheless, we are called on to show something, even when vulnerable. In Negotiating the Curriculum, Boomer recalls Trevor Pateman’s 1975 book Language, Truth and Politics to bolster his case for fragile teachers. Summarising Pateman, Boomer exhorts teachers to ‘question an
unreasonable assertion; say that we don't understand if we don't understand; pause to think; say that we don't know if we don't know' (Boomer, 1992, p. 8). In practical terms, this calls for more silence in the classroom not only in anticipation of a student's answer but an English teacher's thought. Boomer's motive for modelling such bewilderment for students is 'so that they can have open access to the teacher's thinking powers,' even if they feel weak (Boomer, 1992, p. 8).

'Open access'. Language changes quickly – this term is now more likely to refer to a teacher's technology than to her thinking. But Boomer's claims about the rewards of 'rich demonstration' give useful insights about showing students how we use technology – and how we use our brains.

Respondent (Amelia)
Certainly as purveyors of cultural content, an English teacher must have an online presence to cultivate the digital communicational abilities of his or her students. However, rather than expose ourselves entirely, one must have both a professional and a private persona, such as we exercise in and out of the classroom. Multiple internet identities are not unheard of, and, rather than students seeing our nightlife or most intimate virtual scribblings, we should have a presence but also exercise reserve, selective exposure if you may.

Essence 4: Transformation (Exhorter – Caitlin)
I was fortunate enough, during my time in the Master of Teaching this year, to witness one of my fellow teacher candidates perform his interpretation of Rihanna's hit 'Umbrella,' with the lyrics rewritten as a summary of the class's unit on tectonic plates in the Asia-Pacific region. The students were captivated by the performance, and, unbeknownst to my fellow teacher candidate, his transformation of this geographical information into a song was a perfect demonstration of why Garth Boomer's fourth essence is so effective in the classroom.

Transformation as a pedagogical tool is as relevant today as it was twenty years ago, when Boomer's article was published. Possibly even more so, as we now have at our finger-tips a vast array of resources that we can use to generate and share our transformations. Boomer's description of transformation as 'seeing and doing things from multiple perspectives' fits with the belief that we as teachers need to cater for individuals with multiple intelligences in both our presentation of information and the tasks we demand of our students. As Boomer laments, it is all too easy to fall back on the tried-and-tested tasks that have been done to death, instead of taking the time to try something 'judiciously crazy' or 'creatively crooked.' My experience this year has taught me that, ultimately, the classes my students appreciated most were the ones based on crazy ideas that I expected to backfire. My most successful teaching moment on placement came during the Year 7 English lesson in which I set up various tasks around the classroom, and had the students compete in the 'Literacy Olympics'. I barely slept the night before for fear that they wouldn't want to take part, but the enthusiasm I was rewarded with during the lesson far exceeded my expectations. Often, the best ideas require us to risk failure.

Boomer proposes that the more 'perverse or bizarre' an idea, the more effective it will be in forcing students to think. There is much research to suggest that a certain amount of intellectual discomfort is beneficial to a student's learning (English 2010, p. 77), and asking students to consider the relationship between two seemingly unrelated topics, as in Boomer's example of comparing Robert Frost and nuclear fission, does exactly this. However, in a political climate where teacher quality has become the focus of improvements in education (Dinham 2013, p. 91), there are always risks associated with relying too much on novel approaches. Sadly, as Boomer (1993) demonstrates, many commentators suggest that such experimental pedagogical approaches belong in the circus and not in the classroom. While it would be naive to deny the importance of helping our students achieve their best possible ATAR score, this should not be our only goal as English teachers. It is worth remembering that test scores are often a poor measure of an open mind.

As English teachers, we should take advantage of the opportunity we have to transform the information and the minds we teach. The beauty of our subject is that our ideas are not confined to the medium in which we first encounter them. A word is often too small a container for its meaning, and students should be free to explore the knowledge available to them in whichever form it may take. It is perhaps easier for me as a pre-service teacher to find such ideas attractive, not having spent decades struggling through the realities of our educational system. However, with a little positivity and a lot of hard work, I hope that Boomer's insights into transformation will serve both me and my students well as I embark on my teaching journey.
Respondent (Amelia)

Current Affairs has coined the term ‘infotainment’, undoubtedly at the expense of integrity in the presentation of newsworthy items, which I guess is what educators fear when it comes to ‘edutainment’. It is not just teachers either who are concerned about creative approaches to delivering the curriculum, but in today’s high-stakes world students are becoming increasingly conscientious about whether they ‘wasted’ time in a class or whether they learned something. I suppose a caution for us all is to ensure that the novel activities we design are able to maintain the integrity of their learning objectives and in a timely fashion so that other objectives are not compromised.

Essence 5: Reflection (Exhorters – Emily and Glen)

‘You don’t get to possess the wealth of essences without thinking about what you do, what happens and what might happen next time’. (Boomer, 1993, p. 13)

A resounding belief among our fellow preservice teachers, as we commenced the year, was that we would be taught to teach. We noticed early in our studies, though, that questions to university faculty were often answered with more questions, and we came to understand that the answer as an English teacher is almost always ‘It depends’. Why? It seems that in 2013 there are still no simple answers in the classroom. We are working at the crossroads of theory and practice: an abstract, evolving and context-dependent zone, which Boomer suggests only ‘Zen travellers’ will arrive at. Consequently, what has transpired is a kind of theoretically informed ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’, where we have had to take responsibility for our choices and directions.

With hindsight we now understand that this apparent lack of explicit instruction is a defining feature of our contemporary teacher education course: Reflection is the core curriculum. This resonates with notion that the knowledge required to teach English is ‘personally constructed’ (Bramald, Hardman & Leat, 1995, p. 23). In an age which recognises ‘the integrity and worth of knowledge won by people at the workplace’ (Smyth, 1993, p. 1), our collective reflections form the body of knowledge of teaching and learning itself (Taole, 2012, p. 2).

But reflection is not as straightforward as it sounds. Reflective practice requires serious courage. Even after our very short stint in the classroom we can appreciate that ‘stale custom’ can be comfortable! During our practicum experience we often acknowledged that we found solace in standing in front of the class with novel in hand, engaging in a more lecture-style approach to the teaching of a text. Although we are pre-service teachers in the digital age, we easily defaulted to tried-and-tested pedagogies. As English teachers, we recognise that we must practise constant awareness of our commonly used pedagogies, and look for evidence to explain why and how the class is responding as it is and for ways we could improve learning.

Boomer (1993, p. 14) asserts that in order to truly develop the essence of reflection we must ‘make habitual practice opaque’. As pre-service English teachers we were ‘lucky’; the skill of reflective practice to which Boomer alludes was the bread and butter of our preparation. Whilst reflection forced us to learn from our experiences, we wonder now, though, if increased external appraisal and constant ‘feedback’ was detrimental to the tiny seed of confidence and self-assuredness we were trying to cultivate? Indeed Boomer’s Respondent Two articulates a common anxiety of pre-service teachers when he wrote of the ‘guilt that [we] can’t live up to others’ expectations as [we] perceive them’.

After reflecting upon … reflection, we appreciate the integral part that it plays in the making of an English teacher, perhaps even more so in 2013. We must, of course, think critically, be hard on our opinions, and identify our biases. However, reflective practice should have self-care as its guiding principle. We mustn’t fall into the trap of relentless scrutiny. We believe that reflection requires the reflector to maintain some space between their appraisal of their practice and their sense of self, where the infinite variables and uncontrollable forces of education might be factored in. As we were told early on in this teaching endeavour, it’s messy. Make peace with that.

Respondent (Katherine)

As a teacher, the defining feature of reflection is the ability to closely examine and evaluate my practice. It is imperative to reflect and interrogate processes and pedagogies which are taken for granted. Reflection is necessarily confrontational as it involves making pedagogy transparent and open for critique. Although meditative in nature, reflection involves the analysis of data which will suggest whether a teaching strategy was successful or not, and how it could be modified to improve student learning. I assert, therefore, that the process of scrutinising our teaching practices can and
should make us uncomfortable. This discomfort is the manifestation of personal investment in the students we teach. In the process of critical reflection it is crucial to forego personal judgement or evaluation to the best of our abilities. By separating personal emotions, we are more able to evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching and the success of strategies we employ in the classroom. We should not shy away from the confrontational process of reflection in the perpetual search for ‘best practice’ in the English classroom.

Indeed, reflection is not only an essential stage of the teaching process, but is a key stage of the learning cycle for our students.

**Essence 6: Passion (Exhorter – Catherine)**

If the law is reason free from passion, then effective English teaching is the opposite. The good English teacher will not seek to free the cool, calm voice of Reason from the flighty, fanciful influence of Passion: rather, he or she will bring the two together; marrying them so inextricably that it should be impossible for students to feel the touch of one without the other. As a preservice teacher, this balance can be difficult to strike. The harsh realities of classroom management, curriculum guidelines and lesson-timetabling can frustrate the attempts of even the most passionate preservice teacher. Certainly it is very difficult to inspire a love of Graham Greene in a group of seventeen year-old boys when half of the class refuses to read the text and the other half are absent due to a sporting commitment. Yet it is imperative that preservice teachers do not give up on passion entirely.

Reason is, after all, a rational, temperate fellow, and he is a great companion for students in their analysis of a text; be it a novel, poetry, play, short story or any other. Without reason, the budding English teacher would be at a loss as to how to demonstrate the practical skills of text deconstruction, language analysis and application of literary theory. In order to appreciate Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, for example, students must be able to understand the historical context of the novel, as well as the various feminist and post-colonial perspectives which relate to the text. Yet in and of itself, reason cannot engender a love of English, nor can it urge reticent teenagers to turn to their English texts. It is Passion, experienced through engagement, that can ‘… move us emotionally, provoke thoughtful responses and lay bare what it means to be human’ (Wilkinson, 2011, p. 29). The teacher who is genuinely passionate knows how good literature can work on desire and pleasure (Boomer, 1993, p. 15) and can transmit this to his or her students (Moorman, 2007, p. 38).

On the other hand, it is important to remember that passion alone cannot create an English curriculum. It may indeed subconsciously encourage teachers to take up other key essences such as provocation, demonstration, transformation, negotiation and reflection (Boomer, 1993, p. 16) but it inherently lacks a pragmatic or practical approach. I may stand before my class and declare my adoration of Greene’s ability to make the character of Fowler come to life, but if I cannot explain this (and relate it to curriculum requirements), then the benefit to the students is limited. A reliance solely upon passion can result in teachers and students alike becoming lost in a swirl of emotions, and runs the risk that, when conflict arises, potentially rewarding texts may be disregarded by students should they fail to ignite the requisite passion at first glance. This is where reason provides a valuable reflective and analytical framework for directing passionate pursuits within the English classroom. It is good and proper for a teacher to be enthused, and fuelled with passionate love for their subject, but this must be coupled with a controlled and reasonable approach to the practicalities of teaching.

**Respondent (Trent)**

Walking the tightrope between Passion and Reason is indeed an intricate skill I will have to learn to refine over time despite the winds of influence and responsibility attempting to sway me perilously close to either side. The two have been heaving in a tug of war throughout my teaching practice, as if an angel and devil were sitting on each shoulder willing me to succumb to their seductions. Passion is undoubtedly the life-force of my most beloved English teachers; however, if I do not take care to temper my own passion with Reason, I may swiftly end up embodying Greene’s disillusioned and weary Fowler in front of my students, falsely believing that ‘sooner or later … one has to take sides. If one is to remain human’ (Greene, 2001, p. 174).

**Essence 7: Pragmatism (Exhorter – Martin)**

Beyond the world of education theory and behavioural management imparted at university, Boomer (1993) carefully highlights the role of English teachers as educational pragmatists. In particular, Boomer (1993, p. 17) emphasises the English teacher’s responsibility
to promote ‘effective action’ in their classroom, where students explore the power of their imagination to make a difference in their society. For pre-service teachers, deciphering the different social and policy influences is essential to not only informing their own praxis, but also provides the key to helping students realise their own sense of agency for social change.

In line with Boomer’s (1993) seven core ‘essences’ of an English teacher, the contemporary educator now, more than ever, needs to consider their role as an educational pragmatist. Boomer (1993) carefully articulates that the English teacher not only has a strong knowledge of educational theories underpinning their practice, but has an acute awareness of the socio-political context in which they operate. This perspective embodies Boomer’s (1993, p. 17) definition of pragmatism, where the English teacher forges a commitment to reform and ‘dreaming of a better world’. From a more recent standpoint, Gannon (2012) reiterates a concern for the social, political and cultural contexts of English teaching when analysing the recent Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITS) standards, a framework that is arguably conceived as a ‘disciplinary apparatus’ for teachers across the nation.

Gannon’s reflection directly links to Boomer’s contention that the English teacher cannot reflect on their own performance inside the classroom without recognising the multiple contexts that inform their practice. From my own experience as a pre-service English teacher, this contention was particularly relevant during the preparation stages for the Year 9 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in my first semester placement. Whilst the task of training students to critically read and respond to set stimulus holds a place in all English classrooms, the ‘comparative ranking’ of schools on the basis of their final results has the potential to erode opportunities for pupils to gain human capital that will lead to fundamental social change (Redden & Low, 2012, p. 36). Challenging this fixation on performance ranking amidst new testing (such as NAPLAN) in the classroom represents the core task for English teachers in the immediate and distant future.

Amidst endless policy reforms and an increased preoccupation with performance-based education, English teachers now more than ever have a responsibility to be pragmatic educators. In many ways, Boomer’s (1993) seven essences for English teachers are timeless, providing a reminder to all learning facilitators to be aware of their responsibility to students as well as the conditions in which they operate. During my time on placement this year, addressing broader issues including equality and community played an important role in the text selection process for both English faculties. In particular, this practice is recognised by McLean Davies, Doecke and Mead (2013) as ‘literary sociability’, where English teachers need to consider how texts used in the classroom are hierarchically structured and can serve to perpetuate social, gender and cultural inequalities. Without addressing social concerns in the classroom, teachers risk denying students the ‘power of the imagination’, where pupils are encouraged to challenge the ‘status quo’ or better still, the outdated stereotypes that plague many of the learning materials used in lessons everyday (Boomer, 1993). In the future, the challenge for English teachers will be to appropriately design pedagogical practices and inspire ‘internal change’ in the areas of curriculum development whilst satisfying the external standards-based accountability measures imposed by various bureaucratic departments. Achieving this balance will inevitably avoid Boomer’s core concern of reducing the profession to ‘an unprincipled capitulation to inertia and the status quo’ (Boomer, 1993, p. 17).

Respondent (Trent)
Drowning in an endless sea of acronyms and contexts, as a pre-service English teacher I certainly operated in an institutionalised setting with accountability constantly nipping at my heels. Each teaching placement began up in the air as I was parachuted into a range of environments with the hope of finding myself in allied territory, equipped to the teeth with ideas of equality and change. Once faced with the endless complexities of the profession, however, the ideal of pragmatism, as it is defined by Boomer and taken up by Martin, above, began to appear as a mirage in the far distance, an image wavering in the heat of praxis.

I am certain, however, that there is a pragmatic radical within the heart of many graduating English teachers and, with the Eye of Providence no longer watching over me in the classroom (however sympathetic it may be), I imagine that mirage will be become tangible. The lost soul will find his oasis, enabling my students to think freely, to contest ideas, to pragmatically challenge the status quo both within classrooms and English departments, to indeed ‘know what is going on’ and ‘what is possible’ (Boomer et al., 1990, p. 280).

If we are not always pragmatically aiming for
something higher through education, and subject English, then why teach?

Conclusion: Essences and alchemy (Larissa)
There are some key themes to emerge in the 21st century responses to Boomer’s essences, articulated first in 1992; student and teacher agency and identity, transparency, social justice, and balance. While the pre-service teachers engaging with Boomer’s essences, and those reflecting on their colleagues’ ideas, do not show the exhaustion or cynicism of Boomer’s fictional respondents, the texts above nonetheless highlight the challenges facing English teachers as they negotiate a high-stakes testing and standards-based environment, and attempt to balance the demands of institutions and society with the needs of individual learners. Although the context has changed, in the past 20 years since Boomer wrote his original article, and English teachers now work with students in both real-time and virtual classrooms, Boomer’s recognition that all teachers face challenges, and barriers to their intentions remain:

Eventually, no matter how brilliant and resourceful the teacher, the classroom action will always represent some kind of uneasy armistice … Relationships between principal and staff, teacher and teacher, teacher and children, children and children, and teacher and parent, require each teacher to test potential acts carefully against the inevitable boundaries of tact, ethics, resources, rights and responsibilities (Boomer, in Green, 1998, p. 196).

Yet, despite these challenges, Boomer implores teachers to not to take the defeatist ‘Yes, but …’ attitude to reform and transformation, but rather the ‘Yes, and …’ approach. While the teachers who have shared their views here have different ways of interpreting the essences – to both Boomer and each other, in some cases – each is looking forward to their practice with a ‘Yes, and …’ attitude, indicating possibility and potential, even when this is twinged with some apprehension. Importantly, they are prepared to debate the essences of English, to draw them together and explore and contest their own identity as English teachers as it is forming in local, national, international and historical contexts.

In the final chapter of Negotiating the Curriculum: Educating for the 21st century, Boomer reflects that the teachers represented in this book are:

‘polystentive’, inquiring intellectuals, highly aware of constraints and cul de sacs while equally alert to the opportunities to make gains in transforming classrooms, schools and institutions. They are robust innovators who are both radical and practical, visionary and strategic (Boomer, 1992, p. 276).

Over the course of this year, it has been a privilege to watch the pre-service teachers who have contributed to this article, and their colleagues, develop the attributes of the ‘polyattentive’ teachers that Boomer celebrates. In doing so, they have challenged me to think about my own practices as a teacher educator, and to question afresh what ‘makes’ an English teacher in our contemporary context. It is these practices of reflection and interrogation, central to Boomer’s work, that bring about vital professional renewal for all of us involved in exploring the rich possibilities of learning and teaching English in Australia.

Notes
1 See footnote on page 3 of Boomer, 1993.
2 Boomer talks about ‘principles’ of English teaching elsewhere (see Boomer, 1982, p. 144 for example). While these principles are different to the ‘essences’, there is clearly philosophical overlap.
3 See, for example, Boomer’s early work with Dale Spender (1976), and his famous 1982 text Negotiating the Curriculum, and the updated 1992 version, Negotiating the Curriculum: Educating for the 21st century (Boomer et al., 1992).

References


Larissa McLean Davies is Deputy Director, Learning and Teaching in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne, and Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacy Education. Larissa’s research interests are in pre-service teacher preparation, the teaching of literature and secondary English curriculum. She was privileged to write this article with Teacher Candidates in the Master of Teaching. Larissa is the co-editor (with Brenton Doecke and Philip Mead) of *Teaching Australian Literature: from classroom conversations to national imaginings* (2011 – Wakefield/AATE). Contact Larissa at: L.mcleans@unimelb.edu.au
Join a larger conversation
Write a book review for
English In Australia

You read right? So why not write a review?
English In Australia is the national journal for English teachers and its reviews perform an important service for teachers. Reviewing books is a great way to grow your professional library and contribute to a larger professional conversation about English teaching.

AATE encourages reviews on a wide range of texts – classroom resources and textbooks, research, literary theory, linguistics, literacy, history, politics, film and media, drama and theatre, philosophy, comics, computer games – anything that might speak to English teachers.

For more information contact the reviews editor:
scott.bulfin@education.monash.edu.au

AATE
Australian Association for the Teaching of English
Reflecting on the Works and Contributions of Garth Boomer

Tamara Dawson
Calvary Christian College, Queensland

Abstract: In order to adequately prepare students for the summative requirements of Year 12, tertiary education and life beyond school, it is essential that all students are equipped with the literary skills necessary for discerning ideas, evaluating perspectives and appreciating texts within their world (Queensland Studies Authority, 2010, p. 29). Such requirements can best be achieved by allowing students to negotiate the ways in which they learn. Active dialogue between teachers and students fosters cooperation, increases motivation, and ultimately helps students to achieve and have success. Such ideas are valorised in the works of Garth Boomer. His contributions to the English curriculum have revolutionised teaching practices. The purpose of this reflective essay is to recognise and appreciate the relevance of Boomer’s ideas in today’s ever-changing teaching and learning environments.

Critical reflection

Education, as a profession, operates in a climate of constant change. In times when national identity is constantly evolving, it is essential for students to engage in worthwhile and interesting learning experiences that explore issues of cultural relevance. Whilst content taught within the classroom is to be personally relatable and accessible for students, curriculum must also address concepts and topics of broader significance. Achieving such diversification is no easy feat, and as a teacher in my second year of practice, I am discovering the complexities that arise whilst I try to navigate the curriculum and develop the wisdom and knowledge of my students. The contributions of Garth Boomer have undoubtedly influenced the way I implement the curriculum within my classroom. His theories of negotiation hold no less significance now than they did back in the classrooms of previous decades. Whilst the climate of education is constantly changing, both politically and socially, the ways in which people learn through negotiated engagement, exploration, and collaborative reflection, largely remain the same.

The transition from school to post-school life requires students to be highly skilled with regard to developing substantiated opinions and making well-informed decisions. I think it is helpful to remind myself of the reasons that ultimately underpin why I do what I do. I want my English students to graduate as young people of integrity who can make appropriate judgements, who can critically ascertain the meaning of texts, and who can also appreciate and enjoy the aesthetic experience offered by texts. To achieve all this, I understand that students must first be motivated. My experiences from the last two years have taught me that my students simply are not going to want to do something purely because I have declared it to be in their best interest. They have to want it – and want it so much, that they are willing to put in the hard yards to achieve it. Before wanting to achieve and succeed academically, students need to understand the whole point is of it all, otherwise the activity, assignment, or entire unit becomes void of meaning and teaches nothing of quality.

With a strong emphasis on participatory and interactive learning, I have found that the most successful learning experiences are those which encourage collaborative investigations and creativity. One example that comes to mind is the strategic changes I am making in my Year 10 English class. This term we are undertaking a unit on Worldviews. I have a class comprised of mostly visual and kinaesthetic learners. Being the second time I have taught the unit, I am making several necessary changes from last year. This year, I have chosen to embrace the idea of negotiating the curriculum. Whilst adhering to the curricular requirements, I am enabling my class to determine the focus of the assessment task. I don’t doubt that my students are not competent young people, but after having re-read Boomer’s Negotiating the Curriculum (1992), I am reminded that they are also highly capable of successful negotiation. This unit of work enables students to explore religious, social and cultural issues through a multiplicity of perspectives. As confirmed by Cairns, Gardner and Lawton (2000, p. 12), learning...
about different cultures and values broadens the scope of student knowledge and actively connects students to issues of great national and international significance. However, students are further benefited when they can have a say in what they get to focus on (Cook, 1992). Negotiation fosters a sense of ownership, and ownership is foundational to successful intrinsic motivation.

Despite having all the right intentions, as a new graduate, at times I find myself being very overwhelmed by such responsibilities. However, such expectations have pushed me to question the pedagogical framework that I am establishing for myself. Fundamentally, it comes down to two key questions: How do people learn? and What do I need to teach them? Both questions are reliant on one another within the interdependent cycle of student, teacher, and curriculum (Boomer, 1992). The latter question is one that I find easier to answer. I can feel my confidence growing with each new unit that I teach. If I’m unsure of content or curricula expectations, I know how to source the information rather efficiently. My uncertainties regarding the first question, however, are far more challenging to clarify. A prominent fear of mine is that I don’t want to fall into the mindset that diversification of learning strategies is simply too time-consuming, or that it impedes covering all of the necessary content. Learning, for all students, is far too important for that kind of thinking.

Recently the Principal of my school spoke with the Year 12 students about what he describes as the funnel of life. He drew a simple diagram of a funnel shape on the whiteboard. At the base of the funnel he drew a line and explained that this is just like being in Grade 1. In Grade 1, he said, there are many rules and clearly defined boundaries that we must operate within to stay out of trouble, mainly for our own protection. As we grow, the boundaries get wider and so our freedoms become vast. We are more entitled to try new things and negotiate the experiences that we choose to embrace.

I think this representation of the funnel translates when looking at the curriculum. Freedom without boundaries is aimless and can lead to chaos (Cook, 1992). Yes, there are prescribed boundaries that we must operate within, as teachers, to meet the curricula and professional obligations. The framework, however, offers enough scope for diversification, flexibility and student-centred exploration.

In an ever-changing educational climate, teachers need to adopt flexible, innovative and dynamic pedagogical approaches. There will always be limitations to what we can do, but let’s work as efficiently as we can with those constraints to achieve what is our first and foremost reason for doing what we do – to develop the wisdom and knowledge of young people so that they may become well-informed global citizens who can positively influence the world in which they live. Armed with Boomer’s theories on motivation, quality and negotiation, I feel that I can reflect critically on my own pedagogical practices so as to continue to improve not just the value of my teaching framework and strategies but also to improve the outcome of my students.

References

Tamara Dawson graduated with a Bachelor of Education, majoring in English, from the Queensland University of Technology in 2011. She participated in the pilot group of the university’s program, Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools. She has been teaching English and History for two years in North Queensland, Townsville. Contact Tamara at: Tamara.Dawson@calvary.qld.edu.au
I have no recollection as to where I first heard this quote; I hate to admit that it was quite probably something I read on Facebook, but as a studying pre-service teacher it strongly resonated with what I was trying to achieve. For the last year of my degree it became my motto, as I was simultaneously (and not always harmoniously) attempting to both learn and teach. As a first-year teacher, the words are no less relevant.

Reassured by my more experienced colleagues, I understood that in the first term it was more important to establish relationships and expectations, than worry too much about how content was being delivered. This didn’t stop me from spending 12 hours a day at school, returning both Saturday and Sunday for the most part of Term One. I spent the weeks, days and minutes counting down; every time I got to the end of a lesson or a week I was able to fully exhale. For a moment. This was no time to negotiate the curriculum; my aim was merely to survive. It was time to understand my own abilities (and limitations) with each class of students, all with unique needs and expectations of me.

In the second and third terms I was able to relax a little into my position. Realising that if my lesson wasn’t planned to the nth degree, the students wouldn’t start a riot (mostly ...). I developed my on-the-spot planning a little more and started to delve deeper into understanding the students, their families, and the small Far North Queensland community that I was now immersed in. Taking on more commitments and showing that I was a dedicated teacher. Attending at the school restaurant, and running after-school tutorial sessions for my super-conscientious Year 8 Extension English Communication boys. Assisting at the school restaurant, and running after-school tutorial sessions for my super-conscientious Year 8 Extension English Communication boys. Assisting at the school restaurant, and running after-school tutorial sessions for my super-conscientious Year 8 Extension English Communication boys. Assisting at the school restaurant, and running after-school tutorial sessions for my super-conscientious Year 8 Extension English Communication students are where the extra hours that went into my long long weeks went. Still, I was working from the set curriculum, teaching the units that had been stipulated by the department, and assessing using the corresponding instruments. Still, there was no time to negotiate.

Reading Boomer’s *Negotiating the Curriculum* forced me to think a little more closely about my teaching, firmly based on what was modelled over the years of my degree, as well as some distant memories of my own schooling. I had experienced the guilt that Boomer proposes all good teaching practitioners experience. Was my teaching interesting and engaging? Was the content relevant to the students? Were they even learning what I intended them to?

I considered the notions of what Boomer was suggesting about negotiating the curriculum. Back in 1992, the need for negotiating the curriculum to ensure that students were learning relevant material and becoming active agents in their learning was definitely a significant and necessary direction for educators in Australia. But that was 1992, when I was only at the beginning of my own schooling. Now, in a world of Google, YouTube and Smartphones, the need to negotiate the curriculum in the manner that Boomer suggested is, I believe, far less significant and, in some ways, redundant. This generation (and those to come) have a level of access to information like never before. It’s at their fingertips, and available immediately.

This poses a problem, then, for teachers looking to negotiate the curriculum to meet student interest and need. Why would a student wait for a teacher to first inquire and then create a unit of study around a chosen topic of interest when they are able to teach themselves by reading forums and viewing YouTube tutorials – immediately? Likewise, why would a teacher spend endless time planning lessons when it is already available, with the simple click of a mouse, or tap on the touchscreen? As an (almost) digital native, I feel relatively confident in using technology in my classrooms, yet am still being shown new things by students fifteen years my junior, everyday.

Another point made by Boomer about the learning that actually occurs not necessarily being what was ‘taught’ made me ponder. So, I asked my students: What are three things you have learnt in my classroom this year? Mostly, the responses included the definition of the vocabulary words that we had covered the day before, and that my Year 11 English Communication students now know how to write a resumé – something, at the start of that unit, they claimed they ‘knew
understanding of the world today. When considering learning, choice is important, but challenge is where the magic happens.

Of the myriad of teaching and learning theories, which I have read about or practised, not one has demonstrated to be fool-proof or appropriate for all teachers, students and situations. Perhaps not in the notion that Boomer suggested, but every day I teach is a negotiation – it is a necessity for me to ensure, somewhere along the line, that my teaching style marries with the learning needs of my students. So, here I am now, near the end of my first year of teaching, with the confidence of having (almost) survived, and the certainty that I will return for the challenge in the years to come.

Molly Poland is a first year English and Home Economics teacher who began her career in a small Far North Queensland town. She graduated from Queensland University of Technology in 2012 where she also participated in the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools program. Contact Molly at molly.poland@yahoo.com.au

Again, I considered the model of negotiating the curriculum as proposed by Boomer. While there is still a need to provide students with choice and ownership over their learning, I believe it is my job to provide provocations and stimulus to challenge and extend what students will seek out on their own. I stand firmly in the belief that Shakespeare (et al.) should still be taught in schools, even to the future mill workers, diesel fitters and chefs. Many of the texts that I was exposed to in my own schooling were not to my personal taste; however, I cannot deny how each and every learning experience has somehow built my understanding of the world today. When considering learning, choice is important, but challenge is where the magic happens.

Of the myriad of teaching and learning theories, which I have read about or practised, not one has demonstrated to be fool-proof or appropriate for all teachers, students and situations. Perhaps not in the notion that Boomer suggested, but every day I teach is a negotiation – it is a necessity for me to ensure, somewhere along the line, that my teaching style marries with the learning needs of my students. So, here I am now, near the end of my first year of teaching, with the confidence of having (almost) survived, and the certainty that I will return for the challenge in the years to come.

Molly Poland is a first year English and Home Economics teacher who began her career in a small Far North Queensland town. She graduated from Queensland University of Technology in 2012 where she also participated in the Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools program. Contact Molly at molly.poland@yahoo.com.au

2014 Nominations for the National Council of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English

Call for nominations for the position of President-Elect/President/Past-President

This position is for a term of four years. The person who is appointed will hold the position of President-Elect for a period of one year, followed by a two-year period as President and a subsequent one-year period as Past-President.

The appointment will commence on 1 January 2015.

Nominations close on 23 June 2014.

Nominations for the position are made by the State and Territory Associations. Any financial member of a State or Territory English Teachers Association who is interested in standing for the position should contact the President of their local Association to obtain further information.
Living Up to Garth Boomer: An Early Career Teacher’s Reflection

Stephen Wallis

So Boomer, boy did you open a can of worms. What is the nature of power in my classrooms? How empowered are my students? How empowered am I, as a new scheme teacher? A new scheme teacher, on a temporary contract, within the NSW public education system one year out from joining the national curriculum and with four years only of Gonski funding. How honest am I with my students? How honest am I with myself? Negotiated learning implies a conscious process of revealing one’s own belief system and one’s own agenda before learning can begin. So how would I go?

Boomer talked of ‘thresholds of explicitness’ (1988, p. 169) beyond which teachers would not venture in the openness of their curriculum design or indeed the nature of the system in which they operate. I do believe in student-centred learning and I do believe in encouraging students to be critical thinkers. However if Boomer were alive today and walked into my classroom, I think he would see me as manipulating my students into thinking they had a level of autonomy that I know in reality to be an illusion.

I currently have a particularly enjoyable, bubbly and vocal Year 8 class. It is the sort of class that respond favourably to loosely structured and creative tasks. For example, on Friday, I put them into groups of four and asked them to use existing characters they had been developing as part of a fantasy writing task, and write a three-minute fireside chat. Their characters could make jokes, became angry, discuss shared memories, or take the conversation wherever they wanted. Ultimately they would make a voice recording on a lap-top. Boomer would probably approve of the lesson and, judging by the laughter, scribbled notes and excited chatter around the class, the students enjoyed it too.

However, many other tasks I have set have been more structured or prescriptive, and many of the class members are in the habit of voicing dissatisfaction. As a form of engagement, I have started some lessons by informing the class that they are collectively allowed to voice five complaints which would be written on the board. This has proved to be a hugely entertaining exercise for us all, and the class often self-censor what can be considered a complaint so as not to ‘waste’ one. Whilst most complaints are innocuous, at times it has been an unsettling exercise as when I was told I ‘don’t mark fairly’. When I probed further, the complainant said, ‘Sometimes you seem to just choose a number and say “this is worth a thirteen”…’

I have always felt that marking in English is subjective and I find marking many tasks fiendishly difficult. I think that criteria-marking provides only a veneer of objectivity and that pooled-marking is merely a democratisation of a subjective viewpoint. I have often handed back assignments with a number written on them that I believe to be partially arbitrary, particularly if graded by another teacher. So when this complaint hit home, I found myself talking about endeavouring to be fair and there being an element of subjectivity. Perhaps I should have said: ‘You’re right, I probably don’t mark fairly, but then I don’t believe anyone else does either’. But such a response would be beyond my ‘threshold of explicitness’. I wonder what Boomer would have said.

The closest I have ventured to his vision has been a short film-making project for a gifted and talented Year 8 Class. The project was cross-curricular and lasted an entire term. To allow the students to fully explore their creativity, the students wrote a film script with a fantasy theme, involving student actors being filmed on a green screen to be superimposed onto miniature sets that they had designed and built themselves.

The collective goal was for the class to make the best short film that they could, and as such required specialisation. Some students elected to be actors. Some students focussed on filming, including the role of director, while others chose to work on the design and construction of the miniature sets. Because the
School embraced the project, they also worked on aspects of the film production process in art, industrial arts, music and science classes.

Any graded individual task has an element of competition, but because they were all working on the same film project, there was an incentive for the students to work together for their mutual benefit. They negotiated with me for the type of tasks they wished to perform, set their own deadlines, and requested access to resources they needed to complete specific tasks. They also negotiated with each other in order to determine how they wished to achieve tasks. Behind the scenes, I negotiated with other teachers and the school executive to gain access to resources on their behalf and secure class time in other classes outside of English to work on the film.

In effect the class became a production studio and, over the course of the term, the students took on the personas of the roles they had adopted. Actors became more gregarious and conscious of adopting an alternate ‘other’ identity, set designers became immersed in solving creative problems about how to realise two-dimensional drawings as three-dimensional models, and those with management roles adapted to their new levels of responsibility.

The project remains the high water mark of my teaching career because I had the freedom to define the content, structure, scope, duration and teaching philosophy of the project. Negotiated learning in the purest sense is possible. However it requires the right level of teacher freedom and philosophical intent for it to occur.

Most programs I have taught allow limited scope for student input into their learning. Given my admittedly limited experience in public school education in NSW, Boomer’s ideas seem far removed from the current conventional orthodoxy. Perhaps his ideas can gain traction again. I would certainly like to be a part of that sort of teaching ‘revolution.’

References

Stephen Wallis completed a Masters of Teaching (Secondary) at the University of Western Sydney in 2010 and was awarded an ETA Beginning Teacher Scholarship. He has taught English at Canley Vale and Fairvale High Schools. Previously, he worked in the advertising, television production and new media industries. Contact Stephen at: stephen.wallis7@det.nsw.edu.au