Addressing the ‘Essences’: Making English Teachers

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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), and is central to Boomer’s philosophy.

It is in this spirit of inquiry, conversation and collaboration that the exhorters and their respondents reexamine Boomer’s seven essences. They write as pre-service teachers who are poised to commence careers; their reflections reimagine Boomer’s key concepts for a new digital age and understanding of national cultures and, in some cases, this recasts the ‘essence’ as it was originally conceived. A constant theme in these reflections, though, is a heightened perception of English teachers’ responsibility to negotiate external and internal curriculum, institutional, political and national imperatives. While each writer addresses this differently, it becomes apparent that the tension and challenge created by these acts of disciplinary negotiation remains as central to the ‘making’ of English teachers as it was 20 years ago.

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.

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 Dougry 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.

Considering this experience further, I realise that my reluctance to facilitate this state of disequilibrium, when teaching Maloney’s novel, was also due to my desire to avoid positioning these students to reach my understanding of the issues and to think a certain way. Yet, to avoid raising issues for fear that students will not consider them on their own terms is to miss the learning opportunity afforded by provocation (Boomer, 1993, p. 6). My challenge will be to adopt a critical pedagogy (Freire, 1921, p. 44), that will enable students to form their own views and question what is presented around them, without positioning them to simply exchange one way of thinking for another.

Perhaps a key to achieve this, as a teacher, is to enter the classroom prepared to be provoked. Wendy Morgan, as the ‘real respondent’ in Boomer’s article, contends that ‘perhaps the best provocation comes when the disequilibrium is the teacher’s; when she’s grappling with new ideas, new ways of seeing texts (or a textual world) that call into question her old paradigms, and goes on to emphasise the importance of allowing sufficient time for ‘recovery’, before arriving at ‘a new equilibrium’ (Boomer, 1993, p. 6–7). Fundamental to this, is the teacher’s capacity to learn from and with her students.

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.

Disequilibrium is a state that is humbling yet powerful. 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 uncertainly to occur and allow us to question, alongside our students, 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 everlastingly 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 demonstrating, 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 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 (AITSL) 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:

‘polyattentive’, 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


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