As an adolescent I was inordinately fond of a Spike Milligan sketch in which a young soprano warbled and trilled as a voiceover (Milligan himself) gave a running commentary on what had gone into her making – not talent or hard work or inspiring teachers or stage mothers, but food, copious quantities of it – eight miles of sausage, ten tons of potatoes, a veritable field of corn, and so forth. I’m making some of these details up of course, memory being what it is, though I do think I’ve got down verbatim one item, to wit, ‘a box of a violent purgative called Crash, taken inadvertently’, this information offered sotto voce as those unique Goonish sound effects rumbled and burbled as the soprano kept on trilling away.

The sum of us. What goes into making us what we are.

I’m often reminded of this piece of Milligan zani-ness whenever I hear yet another manifestation of the cult of rugged individualism that seems endemic in talk about the profession at the moment, whether it be another piece of gung ho research from a Ken Rowe on the effectiveness of the individual teacher as the prime factor in student performance, or the dulcet tones of Education Minister Bishop extolling the virtues of merit and performance pay for teachers.

‘No man – or women for that matter – is an island entire of himself … Each is a part of the continent’, as Donne so eloquently put it about our human ‘connect- edness’. Which, when it comes to teacher performance, is a point AATE President-elect Mark Howie made in an equally eloquent way in a letter to The Australian:

Teaching is a vocation. The monetary rewards to be gained from this noble profession can’t begin to approach the intrinsic rewards to be had from contributing to the nation’s future by helping our youth realise their potential.

Beyond the contentiousness of her suggestion that Australian teachers are not of sufficient quality, this is why federal Education Minister Julie Bishop’s call for merit pay for teachers makes no sense. Teaching is a collective enterprise. Recent research in NSW has confirmed that highly effective teachers, as measured by HSC results, typically enact a strong subject department culture. Good teachers are part of a good team. (The Australian, 22 Feb 2007)

The ‘expert’ English faculty
My friend David Howes made a similar observation when asked to provide a commentary on Garth Boomer’s celebration of the teacher as ‘epic individual’ in his ‘Mrs Bell’ article, ‘English Teaching: Art and Science’. Both Boomer’s essay (reprinted) and David’s commentary, ‘A Spectator’s Legacy’ appeared in English in Australia 122, July 1998. David was asked how he might create a similar portrait of the exemplary teacher fourteen years after ‘Mrs Bell’. Based on observations of the English faculty in the school in which he was teaching, he suggested it would need to be a portrait, not of the individual teacher, but of the faculty, warts and all, ‘a group video, not an individual photo shoot’ (Howes, 1998, p. 30). It would feature ‘James, who would demonstrate the way in which a teacher can use Shakespearean drama to move and transport students beyond anything they have achieved before – but who is running out of patience with the kids who won’t or can’t work; Fiona, who would show how it is possible to contribute the most effective and imaginative approach to encouraging ways of learning through reading texts with an equally effective insistence that students learn to spell – but who hasn’t heard of, let alone read, James Gee’ … and so on. An ‘expert’ English faculty drawing on each teacher’s particular expertise or strength. The video would show the teachers as people...
with interior intellectual lives, and the pleasures they gained from their own reading and viewing. It would show a camaraderie, based not only on the sharing of their intellectual interests, but also on a recognition of their collaborative need of one another, ‘born out of an understanding of and commitment to the importance of the job they do’. A video, in fact, of the English faculty as a professional learning community at work.

**Continuing conversations with Monsieur Patrick and the transcultural cosmopolitan teacher**

In exploring what might make up the ‘expertise’ of any one particular English teacher’s professional identity, Brenton Doecke drills deeper in his exploration of the ways in which one’s construction of self is always embedded in an awareness of communities that are psychological, as well as physical. He considers the tentacular roots of what might constitute ‘teacher quality’, a valuing of the teacher that cannot be reduced to any set of hard edged ‘scientific’ codified criteria of teacher effectiveness. In the latest book in the AATE Interface series, ‘Only Connect…’: English teaching, schooling and community – in itself an example of a global professional learning community in action – Doecke writes of the interplay of his sense of ‘self’ with individuals and communities that have shaped both his personal and professional identities. Professional learning, for him, becomes a matter of continuing conversations with an expanding ‘universe’ of individuals and communities with which he has ‘connected’ over his life, beginning with his memories of Monsieur Patrick who taught him Year 8 English at Murray Bridge High School in the 1960s. Monsieur Patrick was a teacher, who may have found it difficult to articulate his professional knowledge and practice against current expectations of professional standards, but he was certainly one who had, as did the teachers in David’s English faculty, a rich interior intellectual life. He also possessed a pedagogy drawing on that life through which he offered the young Doecke ‘a conversation that enhanced my sense of what I was doing and where I was going’ (Doecke 2006 p.199).

Writing in the same collection, Barbara Comber and Jo-Ann Reid speculate about what kind of ‘new teacher’ might be required for the new literacies, new students, new resource gaps, and new global benchmarks of the current historical moment. They cannot conceive of that teacher without also speculating about the kinds of communities in which she might exist and practice. They agree with Allan Luke that this conceptualising will require a ‘re-envisioning of a transcultural and cosmopolitan teacher: a teacher with the capacity to ‘shunt’ between the local and the global, to explicate and engage with the broad flows of knowledge and information technologies, artefacts and practices that characterise the present historical moment’ (Comber and Reid, 2006, p. 343). Given the demands of such expectations, rugged individualism will not suffice. Instead, ‘what is needed is a community of teachers that could and would work, communicate and exchange – physically and virtually – across national and regional boundaries.’

**My life as a subject association junkie**

Which bring me to the ostensible ‘topic’ of this article, Statement 6: ‘We are committed to ongoing learning communities especially through active participation in a range of professional communities.’

I’d like to approach this by way of my own professional history. Very apt, given what I’ve just said about the interactions that shape our individual professional identities. I’ve had a long association with subject association culture. I’ve been on VATE Council for 25 years and, in the early days, used to joke that my involvement promised me at least one rational conversation about education a month, something my school context couldn’t necessarily guarantee. Basically it was a way of saying that I wanted to be connected to a conversation about English and English teaching, that was both something more than the school context provided, but which also a guarantee that the school context was informed by a perspective that prevented it from remaining narrowly focused on the parochial. A sense of acting locally but thinking, not only locally, but statewide, nationally and globally given the influence international educators such as Holbrook, Dixon, Barnes, Britten, Moffett, Graves and others were having on teaching English in Victoria. This interaction between the local and the ‘elsewhere’ has always informed my sense of professional learning communities. I was on AATE Council during the years of the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA) project, and experienced first hand what powerful professional learning conversations that project generated in every state and territory ETA, in AATE, in ALEA and between AATE and ALEA. The work of the project continues to reverberate in practically every regulatory standards body in Australia, and has been the influential model in the thinking of many
other national professional teaching associations who have been impressed by the collegiality of its processes, and its affirmation of the importance of ‘context’ in articulating how standards might be met. Working on the coordinating committee for the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) Conference in Melbourne in 2003, I got to see, over a two year period, the ways in which a global professional community might plan and implement a program. For the last few years of my working life I was the Executive Officer of the Council of Professional Teaching Associations of Victoria (CPTAV), the peak body of subject/professional teaching associations in that state. During my term of office I persuaded the council to change its nomenclature from Joint Council of Subject Associations (JCSAV), and its motto from ‘Working together’ to ‘Building professional learning communities’. Looking back on that decision, I now recognise an element of the sub-conscious in it. Given what associations do – provide professional development, publish journals and newsletters, develop resources, advocate – one might have chosen mottos reflecting aspects of those objectives. The Australian Joint Council of Professional Teaching Associations (AJCPTA), for example, emphasises its advocacy role in its motto, ‘A voice for the profession’. Choosing the motto ‘Building professional learning communities’ was a way of putting the emphasis on teachers and educators as active participants in shaping associations as ongoing interactive learning communities, open to collaboration and debate about matters affecting the profession, and not simply as recipients of services and resources of organisations conceived largely as professional service providers.

The pedagogy of ‘productive talk’

I think English teachers perhaps more than most understand the nature and value of a professional learning community. It comes with the pedagogy of ‘productive talk’. I first came across the phrase in something Alan Howe wrote, the reference for which I have long forgotten, well before he metamorphosed into one of those assured inspectors/proselytisers of the Blair education revolution, ‘codifying’ productive talk into ‘performed talk’ tasks that could be measured as oracy outcomes, which was the substance of his keynote presentation at the AATE/ALEA National Conference in 2002. The gist of his argument regarding productive talk in its ‘untutored ... unlearned’ earlier life was that we talk our way into knowledge and all good pedagogy should be constructed around the capacity of students, through the give and take of purposeful discussion, to learn from and with one another. It seemed then an articulation of what I had grasped intuitively, and what I enjoyed most about my university education, the modus operandi of the tutorial system and how it embodied what Leavis had to say, borrowing from T.S. Eliot, about the common pursuit of true judgment, the business of the critic, and then for me, analogously, the ‘business’ of a good English teaching practitioner:

His perceptions and judgments are his, or they are nothing; but, whether or not he has consciously addressed himself to co-operative labour, they are inevitably collaborative. Collaboration may take the form of disagreement.

(Leavis 1952 p. v)

In fact, Leavis called his collection of essays, The Common Pursuit ‘a consciously collaborative enterprise – a sustained effort to promote the ‘cooperative labour’ of criticism’. A ‘consciously collaborative enterprise’. Not a bad definition of a professional learning community.

The social nature of learning

More recently, Brenton Doecke characterised the continuing research into professional standards and the implications of the STELLA project thus:

The potential of STELLA lies less in any performance culture than in a ‘culture of inquiry’ sustained by a professional network involving conversation, collaboration and sharing. Rather than supposing that professional accomplishment can meaningfully be ascribed to individual teachers whose performances can be measured against a reified set of standards, STELLA offers a model of professional learning and engagement that is social in character. The standards themselves are meant to embody a sense of collective identity and joint activity with which teachers can identify. STELLA challenges the narrow, psychologistic view of learning that arguably underpins most examples of professional standards, drawing on the insights of leading educational theorists about the social nature of learning in which people engage as they talk with one another and jointly construct knowledge.

(Doecke, 2006, p. 44)

‘A model of professional learning and engagement that is social in character … a sense of collective identity … drawing on the insights of leading educational theorists about the social nature of learning in which people engage as they talk with one another and jointly construct knowledge.’ As I have written elsewhere in a Teaching Australia research paper (Hayes 2006), on the
involvement of professional teaching associations in the development of professional standards, Doecke’s arguments can hardly be characterised as an indication of teachers being ‘connected to the ideology of collectivism’, to quote the Daily Telegraph editorial (9 August, 2006), ’A timely lesson’, which was critical of the initial responses of teachers to the Federal Minister for Education’s embryonic proposals linking pay rates to teacher performance. Instead they are the outcomes of a genuine research investigation into the nature of teacher professionalism and the relationships between individual and collaborative learning articulated within that professionalism.

The ‘idea’ of a professional learning community
The idea of a ‘professional learning community’ has now become very much part of the educational landscape, and in that fact there are both potentialities and problems. The potentialities are epitomised for me in two recent occurrences. One was my attendance at a DEST forum, Teachers Making a Difference, in November 2006 which brought together teachers involved in Australian Government Quality Teacher Program (AGQTP) projects funded across Australia. However much the forum’s title might have emphasised the creative elan and innovative acumen of individual teachers ‘making a difference’, the cumulative testimony of the participants was about the degree to which their projects had been exemplars of working together and learning from one another, whether it be in school professional learning terms, cluster and transition groups, distance education or schools brought together through the commonality of the project. In fact several participants characterised the AGQTP program itself as one Australia-wide professional learning community, given the capacity of ICT, and teachers’ increasing expertise with it, to create and sustain networks and partnerships, in some cases well after particular projects had ‘officially’ ended. Complementing this was the number of projects that saw teachers working in collaborative partnerships with other professional and community based providers. Leonie Anstey from the Korrumburra (Victoria) Innovation and Excellence Cluster attested to the value of school-university partnerships in the example she gave of work in her cluster in her keynote presentation.

By combining the research skills and theoretical knowledge of university personnel with the ‘on the ground’ familiarity, practical knowledge and experiences of teachers, the aim of improving teaching and learning can be approached from a broader and even more incisive perspective (Anstey 2006).

I’m not sure whether I’d agree with the division of skills being dependent on teachers and tertiary educators’ different fields of endeavour. There are plenty of teachers with research skills and theoretical knowledge and plenty of academics with practical knowledge, but the point is taken. As professionals, teachers recognise and welcome the expertise of other professionals. Similarly, a sustainability education project undertaken by the Sandhurst Catholic Education Office with schools in the Shepparton (Victoria) region demonstrated the ways in which teachers worked with environmental organisations such as Greening Australia, Landcare and CERES – the Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies, Brunswick, Victoria.

Teaching is a ‘collegial’ profession.
Teaching is a ‘collaborative’ profession
The other occurrence reinforces the point about the capacity of teachers to learn with, and from one another, and with and from other professionals and educational stakeholders. It’s the text of the draft A charter for the teaching profession which Teaching Australia has circulated for consultation. The draft charter is, I think, a worthy attempt to encapsulate key principles about teachers’ beliefs, values and practices and goes a considerable way towards justifying Mark Howie’s description of teaching as a ‘noble profession’, motivated by altruism and a concern for nurturing, shaping and empowering human potential. What particularly interested me were the two claims, ‘Teaching is a collegial profession’ and ‘Teaching is a collaborative profession’. The experiences of those teachers in AGQTP projects affirmed this – collegiality and collaboration are the modus operandi of the profession.

One profession, many learning communities
As to the problems, one is a cautionary tale about the ways in which the bureaucratising of anything can distort its original intention. ‘Professional learning teams’ has been one of the buzz phrases in Victorian education for a while; another is ‘local provision’ – that is school-based professional learning. We need to ensure that ‘local provision’ is not institutionalised as a cost saving efficiency at the expense of the kind of exter-
nal provision professional associations provide. My need for VATE ‘conversations’ as a guarantee against the parochial all those years ago is as much a need now as it ever was. I want teachers to continue to have access to communities beyond their immediate school contexts, and to communities beyond the local that are not simply virtual. Face to face encounters of the conference kind humanise the profession. We need to keep on insisting on this fact against any bureaucratic dictum to the contrary: to affirm that any one teacher belongs to a rich ‘universe’ of communities – state, national and global ones as well as the local; the physical as well as the virtual.

Worlds within worlds
The second problem, if it is one at all, is a more exhilarating one: that is the capacity of technology to self seed and proliferate manifold learning communities, and the creativity of teachers in generating their own beyond what even professional associations have traditionally provided. A new professional learning community is only a hyperlink away. Writing in The Australian Financial Review (29 March 2007, p. 57), Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams describe the ways in which ‘some companies have realised that internal blogs and wikis help stimulate creative thinking among staff and capture knowledge.’

Wikis, blogs and other tools will arrive in the workplace whether companies are ready or not as younger employees tend to develop their own self-organised networks that cut across traditional corporate divisions. Increasingly these employees will be capable of interacting as a global, real-time workforce. Indeed if Linux, Wikipedia and other collaborative projects are any indication, it will often be easier and less expensive for workers to self-organise productively than to squeeze them into more traditional business units.

I don’t want to equate professional teaching/subject associations with ‘traditional business units’ but, like them, we are organisational structures whose internal workings and communities are being transformed by the technologies we embrace and the capabilities and literacies our members develop in response to them.

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