Introduction to
‘Imaginative encounters with life’ by John Dixon

A little over ten years before the publication of this article, John Dixon had published his famous *Growth through English* (1967). His intention in that book had been to ‘draw from the discussions and reports at [the transnational Dartmouth Conference for English educators] such ideas as are directly relevant to my own work in class and to that of teachers I know … not to make an end of discussion (in a sort of super summing-up) but rather to propose a new starting point’ (1967, p. xi). Dixon had mounted an argument for himself and for his fellow English teachers to ‘look-out for emerging interest and preoccupations in [our] pupils, not merely in ourselves’ (p. 48). He was urging English teachers to recognise young people’s capacity to exceed what their teachers may have envisaged when planning lessons and when responding to what these students say or produce in the form of written work.

To revisit Dixon’s article in 2014 is to be reminded of the traditions in English teaching which have seen English classrooms as spaces for students to learn to be literate and to grow through engagement in forms of communication that are personally meaningful to them. It is to appreciate that there other ways of thinking about English classrooms than the rhetoric of standardisation, literacy continua and standards-based reforms that regulatory bodies such as AITSL offer. Dixon’s vision of English teaching, articulated in *Growth through English* and extended in ‘Imaginative encounters with life’ (in 1979), can be seen as part of increasingly robust debates about standards in English teaching that were emerging in several issues of *English in Australia* during the editorship of John Collerson (1977–1980).

Dixon writes from a perspective that we might now recognise as reflexive practitioner inquiry, critically inquiring into his own classroom and others’ in order to generate new knowledge and understandings of English teaching. He draws on data for his inquiry (although he does not use the word, ‘data’), as practitioners are increasingly doing in 2014, but these data are not student performances on standardised tests. They comprise stories of student learning, samples of student writing and student talk. When engaging with these data, he resists the temptation to rush to judgement – either to approve or to criticise – but rather asks, ‘What is going on here?’ And having critically engaged, he asks himself and his reader, ‘What implications has all this for my practice?’

While perspectives such as Dixon’s have sometimes been critiqued as romantic and lacking rigour, this article presents a strong argument – deserving our attention now more than ever – for questioning the assumptions behind a standardised curriculum and regulatory landscape that expect students of varying abilities, and of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, to write the same essays, and to achieve the same learning outcomes that have been prescribed for all students at particular ages. Toward the end of the article, he asks: ‘How can I make room for students, after the imaginative encounter [with stories], to go on to dream?’ Indeed. This is one of the enduring ‘starting points’ for discussion that Dixon has left us with in 2014.

Graham Parr, August 2014

References
Imaginative Encounters with Life

John Dixon

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I have been invited to consider influences on the quality of children’s language development from literature and from the modern media, and I have chosen to consider these as imaginative encounters with people-people who offer us stories about themselves and others. Putting it that way reminds me that their stories reach me not only in books, but on television, in the press, in the theatre, at poetry readings, at song recitals, and at home or in the pub, listening to those elaborated narratives Peter Moss is so rightly interested in.

It is only part of English, but already it is an immense field. If we turn to the classroom and pupils from 5 to 18 there is an enormous range to cover and the pupils we have in mind may be at very different stages simply in getting access to the stories people tell. Thus, at 5 most children are entirely dependent on what’s offered on the box, or in family gatherings perhaps, or in class. Some will remain so, for years unless teachers can help. But some may already have begun a second stage. I remember how that new threshold came in my own life. ‘Concerts on the stairs,’ my sister and I called it – and they began when Betty and I sat on the stairs at my grandma’s, while our Auntie Elsie, who was a singer, grandiloquently introduced each of us in turn: ‘and now Miss Elizabeth Dixon will give her rendering of that marveelious song …’ or ‘recite that marveelious poem’.

We were about 5 or 6 I suppose. Up to that point we had just listened to (or joined in) the songs and rimes. Now we rendered them ourselves. It was a great step forward (perhaps more significant for our future than we knew): ‘concerts’ changed us to people able to set up our own encounters, able to mediate them in turn for the little circle of our family, to select our own favourite songs and rimes. It seems a significant step in language development when you actually render what this other person had to say to us all. (Thirty years later I remembered these concerts when I found I was setting up exactly the same kind of occasion for 11-year-olds in an inner urban comprehensive-children for whom it was still a new step.)

Finally, of course, we pass the upper threshold, learning to recite, read or sing not to a social group out there but to ourselves, in an inner voice. This lays open a great field of material, in any spare moment – a special freedom – but I still think it less of a leap forward than the transition to ‘concerts’ and the live rendering for others. Still, those three different kinds of access to stories-through listening (or viewing), through rendering aloud, through silent reading – each with its own features of language development, will be intimately linked and serving each other (I hope) by the time my students have reached 16 or 17.

That’s my field, then; imaginative encounters in three ways with the stories people tell. What kinds of influence – what kinds of learning – might we be expecting from such encounters through stories? From the range of possibilities I thought there were three we might specially want to consider in our classroom teaching:

• learning about the inner life of other people;
• influences on our perceptions and interpretations of the narrative of life as we actually live through it;
• influences on the stories we in our turn tell about people and ourselves.

When I asked myself what do you actually know about the things that go on inside us – both during those encounters and after they’re over – the terrible thing is that for this process, which has been going on inside one for years, I felt largely ignorant. Here I was coming 12,000 miles and I couldn’t confidently describe more than a tiny fraction of what’s going on. So I’ve spent time off and on in the last few months sifting out evidence, evidence I ought to have been collecting years ago; but then, it seemed that nobody else had collected much either, though many others were beginning to collect it.

What I want to do in this first session is to present
some of the types of evidence we might all have to consider – and which we do in a way ‘know about’ day in, day out at school or college. It’s scattered and incomplete, but it’s the best I can do – and I’d like help in the later sessions both in thinking of what more is needed and also in analysing that evidence to find out what’s going on?

Let’s start then with ‘what happens in your head’ when you’re reading a book to yourself. That’s the way Mike Torbe of Coventry Teachers’ Centre put the question to some 11 and 18 years olds. Amanda, aged 11, had been reading Blyton’s 

Five Go Camping. Now we all know Blyton, and I’ve actually spent time in seminars scrupulously looking at extracts to try to find out what children were getting out of it (very interesting too) so I was curious to see what Amanda said.

Five Go Camping

I liked the book because it was exciting. While I was reading it I imagined that I was in it and my friends were in it. And that my mum’s friend who has a farm was the farmer’s wife and that her husband was the farmer.

I imagined that I was George who is a girl and that my two cousins were Julian and Dick and that my best friend Linda was Ann. The book was exciting because they were always having an adventure they were never not doing anything.

Here’s something I’d never expected: a reader who is turning an encounter with Blyton into a kind of play with her friends! I wonder how that changes how it influences her? – and what she learns, maybe? I wonder how many other things children are doing as they read/listen? Mike’s question (what goes on in your head?) was one I could have asked any lesson: but I didn’t. I’m determined to start asking.

There are other ways of putting the question. Jim Squire asked an adolescent class of his to read a short story called ‘Reverdy’ but first divided it into six parts. As the individual reader finished each part, he invited each of them (as an experiment) to say something about how she or he felt and reacted. There is a beautiful transcript of Paula’s responses well worth taking as a case study later. I’ll just read one or two extracts here:

But ah … I dunno … I’d like to know this girl myself … this Reverdy.

Q: You’d like her for a friend.

Uh huh. She sounds like a real terrific person, a person I’d like to be more like myself, and ah … I want to go on to the next part and find out what happened to her. I even like the mother less now … I think she’s an old hag.

Q: Why?

Oh she’s making Reverdy walk out there in that … the … out in the yard. As a matter of fact I think the mother is a little bit teched … and then, here at the end … now I’m positive that she’s jealous of Reverdy because of the last … here she says Mother’s only little dear girl who’s never given her a moment of trouble … the little homely girl with the glasses and so now I even feel more strongly that the mother is jealous of Reverdy and ah … I dunno … it’s sort of bewildering, this story in a way.

You don’t … some things you don’t know what to think about ‘em, and other things you have definite feelings.

Q: What did you have in mind there?

Well … ah … I like Reverdy and all that but I wonder if she could be doing things that were you know … being a bad girl, not necessarily with boys or anything like that but just doing things that irritate her mother. Besides her mother being jealous … I do think her mother’s jealous of the girl.

Q: So you think she was right about Reverdy?

Uh huh … if she does little things to be bad and not trying … I wonder … I don’t think she does, but still I kind of, you know, that little suspicion.

In the story there may be people you admire, feel you wish you were more like, you’d really like to know and have as a friend. There are also people you dislike, and as in life, the admiration and rejection may make it difficult to get a precise view of how people are really behaving. Sometimes that person may be the narrator. In this case Paula does notice that the story is ‘seen’ through a little girl’s eyes:

And ah … I dunno, all through the story the way the author has written it, you feel more or less as if, you’re the little girl. Ah … from ah … her point of view, you kind of feel as though you’re her and that’s the way she does. And ah … I like the way the author wrote it very well/ think it’s very interesting.

Just one final snatch: when the story is over Paula begins like this:

I’m sad.

Q: Why?

Oh, it’s just … I dunno … It’s … oh, it’s a terrific story, but the way it ends it is just … the next morning the little girl wakes up and … and ah … there was the flowers there … the asters and they’d grown fresh over night and Reverdy was gone and ah … I dunno.

When I first tried to read this aloud, I suddenly noticed the language. We’re now into a reflective response to the story as a whole, and something has happened I feel, I’ll just reread the key phrases:
the little girl wakes up and
there were the flowers there, the asters,
and they’d grown fresh over night
and Reverdy was gone.

I could be wrong, but in this first reflective moment
I feel the language of the storyteller imbuing his reader’s response, so that her brief recapitulation carries
through the poetic quality of the experience he offered.
It’s a first clue of an influence on language development
we must pursue further.

Before we do, though, just one more example of a report on the things that go on in your head as you read: as it happens, this reader – Meredith, aged 15 – offers a kind of summary of processes of response after reading We Speak No Treason.

I forget that I’m reading words on a page and pages in a book. I escape, in a sense, to mingle with strange people in strange places, to wander with them in the streets of the past, to listen to them speak or to take on their parts, to cry with them, and laugh. I see them as clearly as though they were beside me-I see the mists on battlefields, I shiver with the snow and see the golden grass ripple with the winds. I live with them … I am taken up with them, in the flow of their lives and carried helplessly along with them to suffer with them.

My imagination is caught alight by them. My mind is set revolving by their actions. I begin to dream of them and their spirits. I wish to be taken back, through time, to live with these spirits. These people whose fate I know, become my friends and enemies. I love them all.

It’s hard to say what my imagination does while I’m reading. I suppose I translate words to meaning and meaning to feeling which in turn makes a picture, a mood, a character. I cry and laugh when moved or entertained, and after I read, I dream.

This beautifully expressive response suggests three things to me. First, ‘To live with them, to be taken up with them into the flow of their lives, to suffer with them’ – all this speaks of a special kind of involvement with the dramatis personae. I suppose the nearest we can come to ‘being’ a character is when we act out their role dramatically. It would be particularly important to try to get evidence of what that means in terms of influence and learning, and I have tried to provide for us to discuss this further tomorrow. Second, surely the language of the reader is again imbued with qualities learnt on this and other encounters? And third, ‘after I read, I dream’. It’s a tantalising ending, but suggests the next obvious field for enquiry. Looking back so far, at different kinds of evidence of what goes on as children read, I’d say my first impression is the variety of active process that is there; the mixture of projecting your familiar life (and your friends) into the story, on the one hand, and of being drawn in to alien experiences to ‘live with them’; making admired friends and feeling enmity; being moved-to love, and to crying and laughing as you ‘know their fate’. You wish for possibilities in their lives, and you face the worst if that’s what happens to them. This vivid, active inner drama we throw our hearts into seems likely to go on affecting us in many, subtle unforeseen ways. But what evidence can we turn to?

First, I think we should look carefully at the language (and thought and feeling) of small groups talking about the experience of reading together. Second, we need some way of tapping those dreams that Meredith ended with. A BEd student of mine, Mary Nightingale, invited a local class of 16-year-olds to muse and dream in this way after reading a selection of poetry and prose she prepared. One of the pieces they wrote has taught me a good deal and I’d like to look closely at it here.

The poem that week was Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ (Mary was investigating tough and tender responses to the sentimental). Perhaps we should begin from it:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or
just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen,
skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood: They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the
Icarus
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

The poem itself is a meditation on the different perspectives of life, death, and the human condition. It explores the idea that while the old masters depicted suffering in their art, ordinary people continue with their daily lives, unaware of the events that will shape their fate. The poem raises questions about the role of art and literature in reflecting reality and providing hope. It encourages readers to think about the impact of literature on individual lives and broader society.
And the ship sails on.
What influence has there been?

In some ways it seemed as if Sue had chosen a different path from Auden. He is attending to the background figures; she is exploring the tragedy in the foreground. But the more I look, the more I see starting points in Auden that were transformed in her dream in a special kind of way:

A the white legs disappearing into the green/Water
S The shimmering beauty below put up green arms to catch him

or

A the ploughman may/Have heard the splash …
S But for him it was not an important failure

or

A the forsaken cry
S And his father’s call was a gull crying in vain

There is more room for tenderness in her dream, and less toughness. I’ll come back to that.

What’s striking about the influence on Sue, though, is that she does precisely what I’m not doing now. She doesn’t abstract herself from the encounter or the experience it offers, but rather involves herself more fully in what’s just hinted at in the final stanza. So the quality of her language carries her on into the experience: she is taken up with these people, and the flow of their lives, and even carried helplessly along with them for moments, to suffer with them.

Until a few years ago I never thought in my twenty years of teaching literature that this might be an important kind of learning to be opening the way for. That it is ‘learning’ I don’t feel I have to demonstrate. But looking closely at the differences taught me there was more learning than I’d realised.

Let’s look back at the Auden a moment. What exactly is he feeling? At first suffering takes place ‘while someone else is eating’, ‘the dreadful martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner’, (while) ‘the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree’. The appropriate tone seems to me to be open, laconic but vulnerable, an acceptance of life as the ‘Old Masters’ see it—so that the section is a kind of summary of their messages (rather like Paula’s of Reverdy). But the second part, the ‘for instance’, is not the same:

‘everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster’,

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Three groups talked over the poem, using if they wished some ‘ideas that might help’ provided by Mary. Susan, I remember, said very little in her group and the following week gave us this poem.

Icarus
Bringing day to earth
With elation he rose,
Soaring high,
Wonder took his heart;
Love shone on his wings
Reflected from his father’s gaze,
As he hung below
Suspended on the wind,
The gentle movement below,
Heaven above, with light for all.

Fears and warnings disappeared in fantasy
And his father’s call was a gull crying in vain
As haloed he rose on his way to everlasting life.
He would get higher than he thought.
Sadly his plumage fell from him,
Followed by an eternal dive,
Beautiful to behold, but
Love turned to grief
And the feathers were drowned.

Driving the flaming chariot
Let loose amongst the stars
Bringing day to earth
For the first time was his son;
With his name, son of Phoebus,
And his glory came his downfall.
He lost control in the fiery chariot
And ice caps melted.
Hills were burnt with human flesh
Till at last he fell.

A star came from the sky becoming a comet
His long fiery hair its tail while his father watched,
The lithe beauty plunging.
The shimmering beauty below put up green arms to catch him
Extinguishing his life and light.

To people who watch, not much they remember,
But life must go on
And the ploughman returns to his plough
'for him it was not an important failure',
'and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
… sailed calmly on.'

This is no instance, is it? The writer seems to be underlying something for himself or me: to ‘turn away/
Quite leisurely from the disaster’ is a different story. The irony of ‘amazing’, used of a boy falling to his death, (a comment I assume from the expensive ship that sailed calmly on) tells me he’s trying to face not the human position of tragedy, but an appalled sense that humans won’t give it a position. From this perspective I can see Sue is refusing to follow him into that feeling, and I think she’s right. But why?

There is nothing wrong with someone trying to tell us the worst I assume, providing he makes it real. What I fear from the gap in his own feeling is that on this occasion, the man we’ve encountered has shifted from an open acceptance of life, to a harder, ironic bitterness with humanity. ‘Everything turns away.’ We all moan about people, of course, and often the stories we tell express that – our listeners know we’re getting something off our chests, and effectively they’re expected to sympathise, to be understanding, to get us out of our black mood. Fair enough. But I don’t think that’s what we are after in ‘imaginative encounters with life’. We hope for a storyteller who neither wants his listener to help him, nor wants to help the listener. And that means there is some specific and different quality in the way he regards the experience he’s telling us about.

People have always recognised this. It’s been expressed in many ways: in the image of holding up (as servant?) the mirror to nature-as if the story-teller only offered back to us what we already know, if we cared to look with attentive care, and as if his service were in some ways as impersonal as a reflection. It’s been analysed as a way of telling the truth not of a particular, historical event but of a kind of event seen as universal. Or as an invitation to contemplate an experience as well as to be involved in it. And thus, old or new masters in telling their story may feel that as well as the aged, reverently passionately waiting ‘there must always be’ children skating on a pond at the edge of the wood; in observing how the dreadful martyrdom ‘runs its course’ they do not forget ‘the torturer’s horse’ scratching ‘its innocent behind on a tree’; as a queen prepares to die, they let the clown bringing the instruments of her death talk to her about the asps and their ways … These stories, then, do draw us in, but that’s not all. In a range of ways, I believe, the tellers release us from being ‘carried along helplessly’, and suggest – explicitly through the chorus, perhaps, or implicitly through the image of the horse and the dogs – that this is also an experience to be contemplated. It’s what Britton dubbed ‘the spectator role’.

I think now that Susan knew this when she dreamed of the Icarus story and transformed the hints of negative despair Auden was feeling. She followed his earlier lead, and it’s only by very careful attention that I realised she’d implicitly refused the invitation not to contemplate but to express – with whatever constraint – a sense of despair with the world. Funnily enough, I remember, she was that kind of girl: she wouldn’t have said explicitly that this was not what she wanted. But her poem is, nevertheless, an implicit refusal to follow the poet in the way he regarded part of the story.

This, I realise, is a form of what’s come to be known as ‘criticism’. And it makes me wonder how limiting a word that is – for student and teacher. If we choose a story, hoping for an imaginative encounter, it’s true we may feel disappointed when the teller becomes burdened with his own doubts, uncertainties, and failures. But how are we to regard him?

Criticism has been tempting us to place the stories as objects of art. I’m not sure now that that’s good enough. Don’t I want rather to learn that in some encounters it’s sympathy or understanding for the teller – his difficulties and failures, even his willfulness – I’ll actually be feeling, rather than awe at the steadiness with which he contemplates and evokes our mysterious knowledge of human experience? This last idea has been quite a daunting thought, considering my practice to date.

Finally, then, what implications has all this for my practice?

(a) Thinking of the three stages in our access to imaginative encounters, should I be making a central place in my classroom for literature ‘concerts’ – making literature, like music, a shared social experience, and giving individuals and groups the chance to render the ‘works’ they enjoy?

(b) Can I find more subtle ways of interweaving this central, second stage with students’ ‘inner’ reading for themselves, on the one hand, and on the other, their listening and viewing while others mediate the imaginative encounter?
Gail went through I think it’d even be surprising to have lasted as long as she did. If you’d wanted to live after all that, a normal life, you’d make yourself believe, that you’ve got something to live for, and that you can live through life, but to let it take time.

But I think that Gail hated life right from the start. She believed that life wasn’t meant for her, that she couldn’t live a normal life after. She wanted to believe that one day the day would come when she’d die.

I don’t know what you feel, but it seems to me both sides are there. I remember my favourite Wordsworth in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. Poetry he said has to be ‘carried alive into the heart by passion’. And with Gonul that indeed seems to be happening. But the poem also offers an experience ‘recollected in tranquillity’, and in her role of caring friend who now knows all, Gonul can realise what would have been needed and what Gail found impossible. As she does so, I believe the language of this young immigrant, and the uses of it she can venture into, is being extended in a profoundly important way, which we must make clear to the sceptical society around us.

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At the time of writing this article John Dixon worked at the Bretton Hall College of Education in Yorkshire, which became part of the University of Leeds, and was the director of the Schools Council English 16–19 Project. He is best known as the author of Growth through English and travelled to Australia several times for AATE conferences and collaborations.

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