Time Travel

(Knowing our history as English teachers)

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‘Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.’


We all know how enriching it can be to revisit a novel, reflecting on the ways our interpretation may have changed, leaving us with a completely different impression of the characters and scenes than those we remember when we first read the story. Such moments say just as much about one’s personal growth as they do about any qualities inherent within the novel.

Charles Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities* was the first ‘adult’ book I read as a child, a reading that was prompted by my viewing of the Ronald Colman film adaptation on day-time TV. The opening and closing lines of the novel – ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times … It is a far, far better thing that I do…’, etc. – were poetry to me. When I reread the novel a few years later, it was only to find in Sidney Carton a shadowy figure, whose choice to die on the guillotine was surely in protest at the dreary bourgeois world that was forming around him. I was left pondering what I had lost and gained over the years between my readings. Since then the novel has accompanied me on a visit to London, when the proximity of the places that form the backdrop of part of the story, though radically transformed over the intervening centuries, somehow framed the novel differently, giving rise to a new reading.

But this process of periodically asking who you are (Gramsci, 1971/1986 p. 324) need not only be occasioned by a work of fiction. I also make a habit of revisiting other books that have marked key moments in my intellectual and professional life and engaging with them anew. Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, St Matthew’s Gospel – my capacity to read these texts with fresh eyes is an index of whether I ought to be rereading them at all. This is also the way in which I engage with the works of that remarkable generation of educators in the post-war period, namely James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Harold Rosen and John Dixon. The following essay might, indeed, be read as an account of my continuing dialogue with these theorists over the years, and how my reading of their works has varied whenever I have re-engaged with their ideas.

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Taken together, the works of Britton, Barnes, Rosen and Dixon could be read as affirming the crucial importance of English teaching as a vocation and field of inquiry in the post-war years. The discursive space in which we continue to operate as English teachers was given shape by their attempts to critically scrutinise the assumptions at the heart of English teaching and to explore its meaning as a social phenomenon. This involved casting an ethnographer’s eye
over classroom exchanges, making those exchanges ‘strange’ and pondering their meaning – I’m thinking of Douglas Barnes’s opening chapter to From Communication to Curriculum, where he examines the formulaic answers of pupils in response to their teacher’s questioning, as well as the surreptitious talk in which the pupils continue to engage, whatever the teacher is requiring them to do (Barnes, 1975/1992, p. 12). This focus on the talk that was actually occurring in classrooms, however, also gave rise to a recognition of the potential of oral language to open up imaginative possibilities that went beyond the official curriculum (or, as Barnes characterised it, ‘what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn’ (Barnes, 1975/1992, p. 14)), providing a powerful rationale for an English curriculum and pedagogy that engaged pupils in activities that were meaningful to them. The key aim was to enable young people to draw on the resources of their experiences in order to make meaning, to enable them to ‘learn to use language for their own purposes’, to borrow from John Dixon (Dixon, 1967/1972, p. 4).

Whenever I re-read Britton, Barnes, Dixon or Rosen, I am conscious of how my response to their writing is shaped by my ongoing work as an educator and the current state of play with respect to policy and research. This has sometimes given rise to a critical take on their work, to a sense of differences between then and now that seem to limit the applicability of their ideas to the current state of play with respect to policy and research. This has sometimes given rise to a critical take on their work, to a sense of differences between then and now that seem to limit the applicability of their ideas to the contemporary world. With John Dixon’s Growth Through English, for example, I have often been uncomfortable with his opening account of ‘the models or images of English that have been widely accepted in schools on both sides of the Atlantic’, namely ‘skills’, ‘cultural heritage’ and ‘personal growth’ (ibid, pp. 1–2). Presented as a report of the famous Dartmouth Conference in 1966, Dixon’s account of three models of English has always struck me as schematic and (given Dixon’s obvious preference for ‘personal growth’) programmatic. This discomfort has partly derived from my abiding scepticism towards the claims made by proponents of various pedagogical bandwagons (‘process’, ‘genre’, ‘critical literacy’, ‘multiliteracies’) that have been such a pronounced feature of the educational landscape in Australia over the past thirty years or so (cf. Ballis and Richardson, 1997; Corson, 1999) – I saw Dixon’s ‘models’ as setting a bad precedent for this kind of thinking, something borne out by the way that proponents of subsequent pedagogical bandwagons have uncritically repeated Dixon’s litany, bringing it up to date by heralding their own approach to language and literacy education as displacing all that has gone before. My discomfort might also be explained as arising from the fact that ‘Personal Growth’ (so-called) has been decidedly unfashionable for some years now, and it is always difficult to cling to values and beliefs that everyone else seems to think are old hat. Over the past few years I have got into the habit of calling myself an ‘old growthy’, because the values embodied in the pedagogy of ‘Growth’ still seem to be the best way to describe my practice as an English teacher (cf. Reid, 2003), but the self-deprecatng way in which I have applied this label shows that I have not been able to escape a sense of clinging on to something that is passé.

I have, however, just reread the opening chapter of Dixon’s book, when I have found myself far less inclined to rush to judgment about those three models, and far more attentive to the key claims he is making about English teaching. These include his emphasis on the holistic nature of an English teacher’s work, on the way that an English teacher’s ‘knowledge or awareness about language’ (p. 10) shapes her practice. That knowledge does not simply provide a content, as in the explicit teaching of grammar, but an awareness that informs crucial moments in her dialogue with students, when, for example, she judges that a student might benefit from being given vocabulary that allows him to name the effect that he has been trying to achieve in his writing (‘You’re trying to put the events in the right sequence’; ‘You’ve written this story in the past tense. What would happen if you were to cast it in the present tense?’; ‘How would you describe the genre of this text?’). Just as importantly, such a heightened linguistic awareness allows a teacher to be alert to the language that is occurring in a classroom, sensing its potential as a focus for play and inquiry. Only a teacher who is aware of how talk mediates learning and experience can sensitively monitor the way her pupils are using language in classroom interactions, enabling them to build on those interactions to achieve new insights into language and experience. As Dixon remarks, ‘the teacher of English will be particularly concerned with helping pupils … to conceptualise their awareness of language’, an awareness that is already ‘there in the pupil’s thinking, not yet explicit or fully conscious perhaps, but something the alert teacher will notice and draw on’ (p. 11).

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Two things have prompted me to revisit Dixon’s Growth Through English. One was a presentation by John Hattie
at a forum on teacher education at the 2014 conference of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE), where Hattie threw up an overhead showing his table of ‘effect sizes’, listing teachers’ subject knowledge as having limited impact on the learning of pupils (it is listed as No. 125, according to one of the many potted summaries available on the internet: http://visible-learning.org/hattie-ranking-influences-effect-sizes-learning-achievement). To quarrel with this ranking is to accept the logic of an analysis directed towards itemising the range of factors that might impact on a student’s learning. Such logic is characteristic of a certain type of scientific discourse that constructs classrooms differently from the way English teachers understand their work. English teachers are typically outside this discourse community, subject to the calculations and judgements of scientific experts that are fundamentally alien to their disciplinary knowledge and professional experience. But so, too, are those experts outside the world in which English teachers operate, uncomprehending of the knowledge and traditions of inquiry that have typically shaped how they understand and enact their professional practice.

Hence my decision to pull out my old copy of Growth Through English from my library shelf, asking myself, as I thumbed through its pages, what it actually has to say about an English teachers’ knowledge and how it might mediate their exchanges with students. What I found, as I have just indicated, was a complexly layered representation of English teachers’ work, where their subject knowledge, in the form of a refined awareness of the way language mediates the sharing of experiences and the joint construction of knowledge, was crucial to their capacity to identify and respond to their students’ needs and to respect the rich worlds of language and experience that they bring to class. Let me quote from Dixon again:

In an English classroom as we envisage it, pupils and teacher combine to keep alert to all that is challenging, new, uncertain and even painful in experience. Refusing to accept the comfortable stereotypes, stock responses and perfunctory arguments that deaden our sensitivity to people and situations, they work together to keep language alive and in so doing to enrich and diversify personal growth. (Dixon, 1967/1972, pp. 12–13)

Or, as William Blake famously put it, ‘To Generalise is to be an Idiot. To particularise is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess’ (Blake, 1969, p. 451). English teachers’ awareness of how language mediates experience sensitises them to the ways that the complexities of experience escape pat commentary and cliché (such as the labelling of refugees as ‘Boat People’ or ‘Illegals’ that blinds us to their plight), as well as the generalisations that people apply when they take it upon themselves to judge the teaching and learning that occur within schools against a universal standard of measurement (such as occurs with NAPLAN and PISA results). Without supposing that educators like Dixon, Barnes, Rosen and Britton worked within an identical philosophical framework, their writing might nonetheless be said to reflect a sensitivity to the particular, to the concrete, to the uniqueness of the pupil who stands in front of a teacher, as well as the culture of the school community in which that teacher is working. Not to cultivate a receptivity to that uniqueness is to step back from the fundamental obligation that inheres within any social relationship to respect the differences between ‘I’ and ‘You’, between my unique world of experience and your own, even as we use the language we share to communicate with one another and to achieve mutually agreed goals.

The works of Dixon, Britton, Rosen and Barnes are imbued with a vision of English, schooling and democracy that is arguably under serious threat at the present moment by the social engineering reflected in attempts to construct young people as citizens of a certain type, judging their capacities against universally applicable performance indicators that ignore the diversity of languages and cultures that comprise an ethnically diverse country like Australia. For that is what seems to me to be at stake here, something that has been brought home to me by my other reason for revisiting Dixon’s Growth Through English, namely my reading of English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy: Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945–1965, by Peter Medway, John Hardcastle, Georgina Brewis and David Crook (2014).

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English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy: Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945–1965 is framed as a curriculum history, presenting an account of English teaching in three London schools in the post-war years. This was the period of the establishment of comprehensive schools that were committed to educating a far wider range of students from diverse social backgrounds than grammar schools with their traditional focus on academically able students, posing challenges to English teachers to develop curriculum and pedagogy that those pupils would find inclusive and meaningful. For the purposes of understanding the following
discussion, it is important to know that Harold Rosen and John Dixon taught at Walworth and that Douglas Barnes taught at Minchenden – two of the three schools that the authors selected as cases studies in order to explore the challenges posed by setting up comprehensive schools.

The fact that the book is a history might prompt all sorts of clichés about the importance of knowledge about the past, and this book is not short of such statements. Indeed, I may as well begin with my one criticism of the book, which is that I do not find the metaphor of the past with which the volume begins, that it is ‘a great ship that has gone ashore’, requiring the archivist and writer to ‘gather as much of the rich squandered cargo as they can’ (Medway et al., 2014, p. 1), very compelling. The book quite properly features an empirical approach to historical inquiry – to showing things as they really were, to echo Ranke (Carr, 1961/1977, p. 8) – but this sometimes blunts its critical edge. As much as I admire the way they have painstakingly gathered evidence by soliciting pupils’ recollections as well as uncovering samples of students’ work and old syllabus documents, such ‘facts’ can never speak for themselves, and the ‘truth’ will never emerge simply through the accumulation of such ‘evidence’.

This kind of stance, when placed against the background of the prevailing scientism of the present moment to which I have already referred, is perfectly understandable (it is difficult to think differently vis-à-vis the ‘common sense’ of neoliberal ideology and the ‘evidence’ produced by researchers in support of a neoliberal reform agenda). Yet although historians are obliged to subject their claims about the past to the empirical test of what the sources appear to tell them, remaining open to discrepant detail that might challenge the generalisations they have hitherto held about a particular moment in history, it remains the case that any history is the product of an interaction between present and past, an appropriation of the past by people writing in the present, which is framed by their own values and purposes (Carr, 1961/1977, p. 12, p. 30; Gardner, 2010, p. 29; Ricoeur, 2004/2006, pp. 333–337). The past is only available to us in the form of traces of the activities of people as they went once about their everyday lives, driven by values and beliefs that might seem strange to us. This requires a reflexive stance with regard to the standpoint from which we might be interpreting the actions and values of people swept up by events of a previous historical era, without supposing that we can ever transcend our subjectivities, or that our dialogue with the past can ever produce an ‘objective’ representation of those events. Every act of historical interpretation is shaped by our own values and circumstances (Thompson, 1963, p. 13) and constitutes an intervention in current debates about the society in which we live and the history that we ourselves are making.

The authors get close to articulating such a standpoint, when they remark that their interest in the changes that occurred in English teaching during 1945–1965 ‘is not purely historical but also relates to the state of the subject in schools today, which we think could benefit from some attention to what was done in the past’ (p. 14). Yet I am still left with a nagging sense that they could have made bolder claims about their purposes in attempting to reconstruct the cultures of the schools that form the subject of their study vis-à-vis the present moment. Hence my decision to use Walter Benjamin’s statement about protecting history from the victor as the epigraph to this essay. They quote Harold Rosen as saying: ‘we have to record all this… not just mentally. It is about saying there was another way’ (p. 6). Exactly. The neoliberal reforms that are being imposed on teachers and their pupils at the present moment represent a triumph of the victor. They are typically imposed without any acknowledgement of what might have existed before them. They represent less a rewriting of history in the interests of corporate culture than its complete denial. They arrive ‘brand new’, like the latest fad. Paradoxically, given the fact that such reforms are supposedly ‘evidence-based’, they resist any scrutiny of the research that might warrant the claims they are making and the tradition of scientific inquiry in which those claims might be located. And through their suppression of their sources in a particular tradition of inquiry, they deny that there was indeed ‘another way’.

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English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy is nonetheless a richly rewarding study that is worth reading from cover to cover. The focus is on three schools – Hackney Downs, Walworth, and Minchenden – all located in London (or Greater London), but all with their own histories, and all engaging in distinctive ways in the larger policy context and social changes that were occurring around them, as English society rebuilt itself after the Second World War. Much of the empirical detail that the authors accumulate in order to create a sense of how these schools were being transformed
as they moved from ‘then’ to ‘now’, from the patterns of behaviour and expectations that obtained prior to the Second World War to the sense of promise of the postwar period, will not necessarily be familiar to Australian readers, though the broad outlines of the story match a similar story to be told about the expectations of Australian soldiers returning after the war and the promise of state education (cf. Esson et al., 1942, p. 72; Campbell and Proctor, 2014, p. 186). My own reading of this book, however, has been driven largely by what it has told me about Rosen, Dixon and Barnes and the conditions in which they worked as teachers that ultimately saw them produce works like From Communication to Curriculum, Language the Learner and the School (Barnes, Britton, and Rosen, 1969/1973), Growth Through English, and Stories and Meaning (Rosen, nd), enabling me to re-engage with those works anew.

What insights have I taken away with me? For me the primary value of the book lies in the way it prompts critical scrutiny of the summary accounts of so-called ‘Personal Growth’ that have figured in debates about English curriculum and pedagogy over the past thirty years of so. The authors themselves are aware that their study challenges received versions of ‘Growth’ pedagogy, specifically

the apparent orthodoxy that what supplanted traditional English teaching was a 1960s ‘New English’ that subordinated intellectual development to creativity, expressivity, and reading for enjoyment, and that the preceding period was largely stagnant and was dominated by textbooks containing abstract grammatical exercises and literature lessons focusing on the appreciation of long-dead great authors. (p. 3).

This, indeed, is the major contribution that the book makes to our understanding of the work we do as English teachers, and I want to devote most of the remainder of this review essay to exploring how they have been able to do this.

The whole of the historical narrative turns on the changes named by ‘Personal Growth’, and yet one of the strengths of the analysis is the way it refrains from constructing this as a sweeping educational transformation, as though English teachers at this time uniformly embraced the ‘new’, jettisoning the bad old ways of the past. The authors resist making generalisations about the state of English teaching across the country in the immediate postwar period, arguing that the changes wrought were gradual and varied depending on the culture of the school in which they were occurring. In this respect, the authors provide a useful methodological rationale for choosing Hackney Downs, Walworth and Minchenden as the basis for their case studies, stating that their goal was to:

work intensively on a small number of schools in order to construct relatively deep, richly concrete, and fine-textured histories. Three schools was the most to which we felt we could do sufficient justice. Such narrowly focused studies enable researchers to take account of particularities of situation and context the possible significance of which general histories are likely to occlude. Not only do schools differ but differences occur within categories of schools. Thus grammar schools are by no means all alike in intake, ethos, or practice. Likewise, broad categories of location such as ‘suburb’ or ‘inner-city working-class district’ conceal a wide range of often quite striking differences. (p. 7)

Although life in Hackney Downs, Walworth and Minchenden was shaped by a common professional and policy landscape that emerged in the postwar period, they were each the product of a distinct history, and the schools and teachers working within them responded to their common situation differently. Hackney Downs appears to undergo change in the way that English is understood and taught in the period from 1945–1965, but the practices that obtain, as the authors have been able to reconstruct them from interviews with former pupils, as well as extant exercise books and examination papers, continue to have a more ‘traditional’ cast than is the case at either Walworth or Minchenden. The English teachers who successively headed the English Department at Hackney Downs were all remembered fondly by former pupils, especially with respect to the way they imbued in them a love of literature, even as they operated within an organisational structure that involved streaming. As the authors remark of John Medcalf, the first of the three Senior English Masters they examine: ‘He had the ability to fire pupils’ imaginations and to engage their interests – sometimes at the deepest levels. His lessons were neither unvaried nor dull, but of their time’ (p. 59). Medcalf’s successors, Jo Brearley and John Kemp, likewise each gave to the position of Head of English a personal stamp, one actively usurping the official syllabus in a gesture similar to the famous moment in Dead Poets’ Society, when Mr Keating forces his pupils to tear out the introduction of the poetry anthology that had been set because he deems it to be unsatisfactory (p. 64).

It is significant for the overall history of the period that emerges in the course of the book that both Brearley and Kemp were influenced by I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, and the moment of Scrutiny (p. 63, pp. 70–71). Kemp
recalls Leavis’s criticism as giving ‘a shape to everything, and for a time it became a bit of a salvation’ (p. 70). The authors thus pose the question of the differences between so-called Cambridge English and the ‘new’ English associated with the Institute of Education in London in a way that goes beyond hard-and-fast binaries. What one senses in reading their account of English at Hackney Downs is an abiding interest on the part of all three Heads in the imaginative possibilities of literature and the value of attentive reading, though this did not stop them from given emphasis to the explicit teaching of grammar as a discrete component of the curriculum (p. 75). Noting that ‘the critical analysis of demanding literary texts became the central activity under Kemp’ (p. 75), the authors remark that this disposition made him open to ‘negotiating changes that led to the school becoming a nonselective comprehensive school’ (p. 77). While Kemp’s emerging awareness that the ‘backwardness’ of working class children ‘with quite a fair IQ’ was due to their ‘social environment’ (p. 68) was a far cry from Harold Rosen’s affirmation of the linguistic and cultural resources that working class children brought to school (the dominant note at Walworth), one can still sense a change in his practices that was driven by a desire to provide a curriculum that was meaningful to students – and this was because of his commitment to the cultural mission set out in books like Leavis and Thompson’s *Culture and Environment*, rather than something in conflict with it (p. 71; see Leavis and Thompson, 1933/1977).

I have been dwelling on Hackney Downs, not simply because it provides a backdrop for the more innovative practices that were being developed by Rosen and Dixon at Walworth and Barnes at Minchenden, but because it reflects one of the major strengths of this study, which is the ingrained respect the authors show for the workaday world of English teaching and the complex ways in which teachers learn from their practice. The teachers at Hackney Downs were no less driven by beliefs and values than the teachers at the other schools, especially with respect to the way Brierley and Kemp embraced Leavis’s cultural project. All the teachers who feature in the book – whether they were working at Hackney Downs, Walworth or Minchenden – were socially and culturally and indeed politically aware individuals who brought to their teaching a set of beliefs and values that they had developed in the course of their lives. One recognises in the stories of each school committed teachers who are each deeply engaged with ideas, not simply with regard to what might work within classroom settings (to invoke the narrow technicist mentality that characterises standards-based reforms). They were, instead, asking questions about the meaning of their work and why English teaching as they understood it might be important for the social wellbeing of their students and the maintenance of a genuinely participatory democracy.

Their responsiveness to the challenge of bringing a diverse range of pupils together in comprehensive schools shows their political engagement in their era, including a recognition that it is precisely at this level that teachers should be aware if they are to implement change in a fully knowing way. Those larger contexts are inescapable, mediating everything that happens in schools, requiring of teachers a capacity to weigh up the significance of any initiative within the context of the whole, not simply with an eye to gauging immediate effects but with a view to its ideological implications. What messages am I giving to my pupils about the role that language plays in their lives when I treat texts as simply messages to be decoded? How am I opening up other ways of experiencing life when I equate language and literacy with the skills measured by standardised literacy testing? How am I enacting democratic values when I impose my will on students rather than negotiating the curriculum with them? The only way to answer such questions is to locate them within the ideological framework that you have developed in the course of your life. The complex nature of the learning of the teachers who feature in this book is due to the way that they were all able to make links between what they were doing in schools and their beliefs and values as citizens of the postwar democracy that was emerging in England.

It is worth noting that traditional practices persisted in all the schools that provide the focus of this study. Not all the teachers at Walworth and Minchenden shared the vision of English teaching espoused respectively by Rosen and Barnes, especially with respect to abandoning the explicit teaching of grammar. On the other hand, it is also noteworthy that, as the authors remark, ‘many if not most of the methods associated with progressive practice in English were already around in the 1950s’ (p. 74), the outcome of reflective teachers responding to the changing policy environment heralded by the 1944 Education Act. What emerges in the course of the book is a richly textured account of a situation that continued to be shaped by traditional practices and expectations (e.g. examination requirements and ability streaming), but where
educators had begun to participate in professional networks – most notably the London Association for the Teaching of English – in which they could share their experiences and develop their ideas. These intellectual networks produced significant publications, such as *Reflections* 1963/1964), the English Course for students aged 14–18, written by Clements, Dixon and Stratta on the basis of their teaching experiences at Walworth (see Clements, Dixon and Stratta, 1963/1964; 1963/1968). They also gave rise to changes in the way school and classroom life were organised – I am thinking of the structures that need to be put in place in classrooms in order to facilitate productive classroom conversations as Barnes envisaged them. Such changes, however, are best understood, not on a spectrum from more traditional to progressive ideas, but as moments of intervention from which teachers were all trying to learn, changes that were sometimes successful and sometimes not. ‘You will not piss on my Shakespeare’ – so John Kemp apparently exclaimed when he attempted to introduce a more active engagement on the part of pupils with Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, only to see the class descend into chaos (p. 74).

The core of the book, however, is undoubtedly the chapter on Walworth, a school that through its Principal, Anne O’Reilly, had embraced the ideal of a comprehensive education, articulating ‘the Walworth Way of Life’ as providing ‘a rich social environment’ for ‘the developing potentialities of the adolescent’, making ‘provision for them to experience the democratic way of life with opportunities for the interchange of personalities, for free speech and discussion, and for the acceptance of responsibility for the well-being of the school community’ (p. 82). School, in short, was not simply viewed as a preparation for entry into a democratic society but as an enactment of it. Within the framework she established, successive Heads of English – Arthur Harvey, Harold Rosen, John Dixon – developed curriculum and pedagogy to meet the needs of the diverse range of students who had begun attending the school. As with their account of the Heads at Hackney Downs, the authors differentiate between these personalities, noting that Harvey’s teaching ‘was about bringing literary culture to children from an environment not normally regarded as favouring such an endeavour’ – a recognisable stance that might have also been found in a traditional grammar school. What distinguished his stance from that of teachers in grammar schools was ‘his emphasis on creative writing as well as on literature and grammar’ (pp. 83–84).

The overriding impression that emerges through their accounts of Walworth under Harvey, Rosen, and Dixon, as well as the work of the other players here who subsequently became known for their innovative practices, such as Alex McLeod, Simon Clements and Leslie Stratta, is that of individuals with strong ideological and professional commitments, engaging with the children they were teaching and learning from them in the process of doing so.

Part and parcel of the ideas that began to shape the practice of these innovative educators are the collaborative relationships they enacted through participating in the culture at Walworth, making the English Department a forum for sharing their experiences and insights and inquiring into the language and learning of their pupils. As John Yandell has remarked in a recently published review of the book (Yandell, 2014, pp. 403–404), the dynamics of the English Department, as led by Rosen and then Dixon, are arguably quite unlike anything that exists in the heavily regulated environment typically imposed on schools today. Rosen produced a syllabus that was crafted specifically with the needs of adolescents from working class communities in mind, explicitly disavowing any deficit construction of the language and experiences these young people were bringing to school. It is difficult to imagine a similar statement being made today, when so much that is said and done in schools is mediated by the generalised language of standards-based reforms and the language of performance appraisal and improvement directed towards achieving higher literacy levels as measured by standardised tests. Here is what Rosen wrote:

> The teaching of English at Walworth calls for a sympathetic understanding of the pupils’ environment and temperament. Their language experience is acquired from their environment and from communication with the people who mean most to them. This highly localised language is likely to stand out in their own minds in strong contrast to the language experience being consciously presented in the framework of English lessons in particular and school work in general ... Whatever language the pupils possess, it is this which must be built on rather than driven underground. However narrow the experience of our pupils may be (and it is often wider than we think), it is this experience alone which has given their language meaning. The starting point for English work must be the ability to handle effectively their own experience. (p. 90)

Such ideas, as they were taken up and implemented by Rosen, Dixon and their colleagues, built Walworth’s
Barnes's stance, quoting from an essay he himself describes in the autobiographical account he gives of his work at Minchenden, which he characterises as a switch 'from a reified version of culture into experience’ to ‘starting with experience and then moving to literature.’ (p. 137), a change that Barnes himself describes in the autobiographical account he gives of his work at Minchenden, where he worked at Minchenden ‘from his own earlier thinking where he would start with literature and move out into experience’ to ‘starting with experience and then moving to literature.’ (p. 137), a change that Barnes himself describes in the autobiographical account he gives of his work at Minchenden, which he characterises as a switch ‘from a reified version of culture to a culture that inhered in interpersonal and social interaction, and the active meanings they generated’ (Barnes, 2000, p. 47; see also p. 36, p. 38).

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I have been focusing on the way that English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy: Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945–1965 challenges conventional understandings of the history of English curriculum and pedagogy as a series of models or paradigms that have each progressively been displaced by the other. Such a schematic view of the history of subject English hardly constitutes a history at all, eliding the complexities of naming any period in history as distinct from what has gone before and what follows it. This is not to deny that such rhetoric may have strategic value at certain moments in history, though whether this is for good or ill is another question – there are countless moments in history when advocates of change have signalled a radical break from the past, a new beginning when society was to be miraculously transformed, putting the evils of the past behind it. Such declarations are usually belied by the actual course of events in which the actors are entangled (to echo the distinction that Barnes makes between the intended and the enacted curriculum, but putting it on a world historical scale!), when people’s consciousness of their deeds typically struggles to catch up with what they have actually done.

The predominant narrative of pedagogical band-wagons and successor regimes persists. Just as I was finishing English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy, a lively collection of essays fell into my hands, featuring a chapter by Terry Locke in which he describes how the ‘Cultural Heritage’ model was displaced by ‘Personal
Growth’ (or ‘Progressive’ English), which in turn came under critique by the ‘Australian Genre School’, until finally we reach the advent of ‘Critical Literacy’ (Locke, 2014, p. 23). Locke claims that all these discourses ‘need to be seen as historically and socially situated’ (p. 16), that none of them is likely to exist in any pure form in any classroom, and that ‘they are likely to coexist in most educational settings today’ (p. 16). He then concludes his survey of these paradigms with a section entitled ‘Critical Eclecticism’ (p. 25), suggesting that we have reached a point in our history when we can put this internecine strife behind us and simply get on with our jobs as English teachers. This ‘eclecticism’ seems to me to be undermined, however, by the language he uses to characterise each paradigm, especially when he repeats Cope and Kalantzis’s accusation (made at the time of the ascendancy of the so-called ‘Genre School’) that ‘Personal Growth’ is ‘culture bound’, and that

the progressive mould with its prescriptions for individual control, student-centred learning, student motivation, purposeful writing, individual ownership, the power of voice matches the moral temper and cultural aspirations of middle-class households (Locke, p. 18, Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, p. 6).

The account of Personal Growth in English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy can only leave you puzzled by Cope and Kalantzis’s caricature of the enormous intellectual achievement of Dixon and his contemporaries. But while a number of objections might be raised against Locke’s account of this and the other ‘Paradigms’ he presents, the big question raised by English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy is why we should continue to think in this way at all. When you walk into an English classroom, you do not initially encounter ‘Paradigms’ or ‘Models’ of English, but people interacting with one another, teachers with their students, and students with each other. The phenomena of classroom life are mediated by multiple contexts, many of which are beyond the consciousness of the actors, but to understand how the particularities of this scene are actually being played out within those larger contexts is a complex intellectual operation that renders any attempt to label anything that is occurring there as ‘Personal Growth’ or ‘Genre’ or ‘Critical Literacy’ utterly simplistic. What the actors see and do within this setting will be shaped by their individual standpoints, but it is impossible to say that what they think determines what they do in any straightforward way. No setting in which people interact with one another lends itself to analysis of this kind. There are any number of theorists whose work supports this approach to interpreting what happens in classrooms – I have found Dorothy Smith’s account of ‘institutional ethnography’ (2005) particularly helpful (see Doecke & McClenaghan, 2011) – but I will go no further here than saying that it is precisely this kind of reflexive engagement with classroom life that is a hallmark of the work of people like Dixon, Rosen, Barnes, and Britton, and, for that matter, of the work of Medway, Hardcastle, Brewis and Crook.

My reading of English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy: Emerging Choice in London Schools, 1945–1965 has involved a dialectical play between the broad brushstroke understanding of ‘Growth’ and the more finely nuanced account of the practices and beliefs of educators at Walworth and Minchenden that emerges in the course of this study. What I have finally been left with after putting the book down is an enlivened sense of how ‘Growth Pedagogy’ developed as a response to the social world that emerged after the Second World War, as part of a vision of social democracy that was current at that time. For the teachers at Walworth and Minchenden this commitment to democracy was expressed in the belief that:

a condition for their pupils’ fuller engagement was bringing a sense of – from the pupils’ point of view – reality into English. They therefore made changes to both curriculum and pedagogy, making the pupils’ lives and experiences the starting point of lessons and encouraging them to talk, using whatever language and forms of expression ‘came naturally’, under the immediate need or desire to communicate. It was no longer the case that school work involved leaving outside the classroom door both everything you knew from your life and your accustomed ways of talking about things. Pupils were positively encouraged to speak and write about the world they knew … [this work] was the best basis for enlarging language capabilities, since writing willingly undertaken about content that mattered to the writer tapped, in Rosen’s phrase, ‘the springs of language’. The crucial insight – not Rosen’s alone – was that the development that children have achieved by the age of 11 had been achieved in language learned and used in home and community, and that a language that was more versatile and capacious could only come by development from what was there already. (Medway, et al., p. 149)

The experiences and languages of the young people we are teaching form the indispensable basis for an education that is meaningful to them, requiring us to facilitate productive classroom dialogue that supports all students in their efforts to make sense of their lives.
The radically impoverished nature of standards-based reforms and the measurement mindset that underpins them is reflected in the way this fundamental insight has been lost. However, this book not only enables us to reclaim this insight, but to reaffirm the importance of attentiveness to the language of students, as well as an interpretive stance that is at the heart of our education as English teachers. This is something that we practice both through the literature we read and the approach we take whenever we enter classrooms, where everything that occurs can be subject to multiple readings and no one can claim to know the ‘truth’.

*English Teachers in a Postwar Democracy* provides us with an important intellectual resource that allows us to rethink what we do as English teachers and to reaffirm the richness of the intellectual and pedagogical traditions in which we work vis-à-vis the ‘knowledge’ underpinning standards-based reforms. Through exploring an important moment in our ‘making’ as English teachers, the book opens up the possibility of understanding our practice as a continuing process of making, as a history that cannot be contained by the reified knowledge of standards-based reforms.

**References**


