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Edited by Wayne Martino and Chris Cook 1998

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Val Kent with a contribution by Ray Misson 2000

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Barbara Kander with a foreword by Michelle Fine 2001

*PrACTices of English: Teachers, Learners and Technology*
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*For All Times? Critical Issues in Teaching Shakespeare*
Edited by Paul Skrebels and Sietsa van der Hoeven, with a foreword by John Bell 2002

*Empowering Readers: Ten Approaches to Narrative*
Garry Gilland, with a foreword by Alec McHoul 2002

*English Teachers at Work: Narratives, Counter Narratives and Arguments*
Edited by Brenton Doecke, David Horner and Helen Nixon 2003

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AATE Interface Series
Commissioning Editor: Sieta van der Hoeven

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Cal Durant

Australian teachers of English have been attracting international attention and respect for over a quarter of a century (Gill, 1992). A recent appraisal of English teaching in the United States, England and Australia has concluded that ‘[Australian] practices, pedagogies and classroom materials' provide the best model internationally in preparing students for life and work in the twenty-first century (Peel, Patterson and Gerlach 2000: pp. 358–359).

Performance indicators at both national and international levels support this view. International literacy testing by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development places the reading and written communication skills of Australian fifteen year olds as second only to those of students in Finland. National literacy testing undertaken on behalf of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs has found that 90% of students are reaching agreed literacy standards.

It is both puzzling and disturbing then that over the past eighteen months we have witnessed one of the most persistent and public attacks on Australian school education that I can recall since entering the teaching force nearly thirty years ago. Public schools and university Education faculties—along with their teachers—continue to be the principal targets, whether in connection with curriculum, pedagogy or policy, and the professionalism of Australian teachers and educators is being called into question at the very highest government levels.

English teaching and literacy education have featured at the forefront of many of these 'crisis' exchanges, particularly at the hands of those who hold what is essentially a deficit-model view of school education in this country with a strong neo-conservative slant. Still, as Paul Brock (1998) has reminded us in the past, there is nothing new about such claims and counter-claims:
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Teacher-bashing and the slamming of those of us who try to introduce enlightened balance into the perennial and simplistic rantings of some of our media pontificators as they peddle their 'we'll all be ripe' mythologies, is an age-old sport (p. 6).

In the past, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English has attempted to meet such criticism head on through editorial responses in its journal English in Australia and appropriate media releases. What has become evident is that in this particular debate, there is no such thing as a level playing field. In an article that appeared in English in Australia towards the end of 2005, I summarised a single week of this debate and touched on the problems AATE and its affiliated association members continually face in gaining right-of-reply space in Australian media outlets.

While I am not suggesting that we are denied access in a conspiratorial sense, it is clear that the type of access provided (generally highly edited letters-to-the-editor as opposed to full length feature articles) says a great deal about how such media orchestrated issues and debates are constructed, politicised, monitored and weighted when presented for public consumption.

It is fitting then, that a volume such as Only Connect—a book that addresses and challenges so many of the well loved English Education myths that the popular press chooses to push as 'facts'—should be the next book to be launched in AATE's Interface series. This book, and indeed the entire series, demonstrates the abiding commitment of Australian English teachers and educators to sustained and rigorous inquiry into their own work, and their desire to learn from the best international educational thinking and practice.

The editors, Brenton Doecke, Mark Howie and Wayne Sawyer are at the forefront of English Education in this country, and are worthy champions of its cause; amongst them, they strike some telling blows, yet the text's overall tone remains one of optimism and hope, resonating with Forster's call to 'connect without bitterness'.

Brenton Doecke is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, and this is the fourth book in the Interface series which he has played a major hand in steering towards publication. He is known for the passion that he displays in his own teaching and writing, and his forward vision for English Education has been evident in the outstanding contributions he has made to both VATE Council and AATE, particularly during his landmark editorship of English in Australia, and through his work on national research projects such as STELLA.

Mark Howie is President of the NSW English Teachers' Association (ETANSW) and has taught English in Sydney's outer western suburbs for some sixteen years. In many respects, he could be described as belonging to the 'New Wave' of Australian English teachers: dedicated, energetic, articulate, determined and street savvy. If the events of the past eighteen months are any indication of the pressures English teaching
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I first met Wayne Sawyer at Sydney University during the mid-80s; we were both taking postgraduate English Education units with Ken Watson at the time. Like many of Ken’s former students, Wayne moved into the higher education sector after spending a number of years as Head of English at high schools in Sydney’s western suburbs. He is now Associate Professor of English Education at the University of Western Sydney, is a former President of ETANSW, and—like Brenton—is a highly respected past editor of English in Australia.

So there you have the Only Connect editorial team—our own sleek version of a production ‘B’M”W”. Each is eminently qualified to write on the subject of English literacy teaching—unlike many of the critics who gain such ready access to national newspaper column space in this country.

Of course, there is one other contributor who in this instance shall not remain anonymous. Sietsa van der Hoeven has been largely responsible for the success of AATE’s Interface series, and has served as Commissioning Editor since 1997. This is the last of the series publications to go to press under her imprint, though her influence will undoubtedly continue. Sietsa is one of those quietly efficient people without whom nothing much would ever get done. In talking to others who have benefited from her close editorial attention to detail, it is clear that she has provided a gentle yet decidedly purposeful framework of editorship during the evolution of the Interface series. The fact that this is the tenth volume is a tribute both to her insight and dedication to the role of Commissioning Editor. It should not be forgotten that along with English in Australia, it is the critical mass of work that constitutes the Interface series that helps ‘connect’ AATE Council with its members and the English teaching community as a large. Our thanks go to Sietsa for a job very well done.

Cal Durant
School of Education, Murdoch University
Incoming Interface Series Editor

References


No single-factor model is likely ever to account for the complexity of the ‘lived world’ and embrace the totality of human experience. (Bauman 2004: 33)

This volume brings together a number of teachers and academics who argue the centrality of English to education, schooling and a sense of community. They oppose simplistic media constructions of schools and English teachers as ‘failing’.

All the authors recognise that globalisation and the spread of corporate culture have produced a crisis of values, and that these developments require sustained inquiry in order to understand the present (cf. Bauman 2004). This is not to say that globalisation is necessarily a bad thing, or that it is a finished product that inevitably undermines national economies and local communities. But we cannot understand the present moment simply by reading the daily newspaper. Any serious intellectual work involves tracing the complex network of relationships that stretch beyond here and now, enabling us to understand the present as a moment in history (this is one way in which the authors of this book understand the imperative to ‘connect’).

Today’s headlines about falling educational standards will eventually be forgotten, just one more episode in a string of crises that the media has manufactured over the past few decades, as well the cast of characters who are currently mouthing neo-conservative nostrums (cf. Gill 1998: 13–14; Gill 1994: 96–113). Yet recent attacks on English teaching have seemed especially destructive. For commentators like ‘Donnelly’ and ‘Slattery’ (we use these names to designate a cluster of neo-conservative views about education and schooling that are currently being propagated by mainstream media in Australia), the rightness of their case appears to justify throwing aside the conventions that are usually followed when debating matters of public importance. They do not brook counterargument, choosing instead to caricature the views of those
CHAPTER ONE

The Present Moment

Brenton Doecke, Mark Howie and Wayne Sawyer

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with whom they disagree. When they cite research to support their claims, it is typically research of a certain kind, without any acknowledgement of the validity of other types of inquiry. They claim to speak a language of ‘common sense’, dismissing ‘theory’ as a perverted travesty of what everyone ‘knows’ (see Donnelly 2004).

The solutions that such commentators offer to the problems they identify (Slattery, for example, advocates putting ‘literacy before “radical vanity”‘ and stamping out “post modernist mumbo jumbo”‘—see Slattery 2005a, 2005b) hinder any attempt to understand the challenges with which Australia and other societies are currently faced. To borrow the language of Zygmunt Bauman, they are simplistic solutions that fail to account for the complexity of the ‘lived world’ and the totality of human experience (Bauman 2004: 33). By contrast, the contributors to this volume offer provisional frameworks, new ways of seeing that may take us into the future, and enhance our sense of what it means to be human.

The chapters in this volume can be grouped in the following way (not all chapters fit neatly into these categories, and most accomplish more than one thing):

- Chapters written by teachers that convey a sense of their professional knowledge and experience, including the complexities of handling the views and values that students bring into class. They thus challenge the neo-conservative accusation that they are foisting their opinions on students. (Bellis, Bulfin, Cleane, Darcy, Griffin, Howie, Kirwan, McClenaghan, McGraw)
- Chapters by international academics and teacher educators from countries where neo-conservative reforms have been implemented, thus offering a perspective on the attack on English teaching and democracy that are currently happening in the attack on English teaching and democracy that are currently happening in Australia. (Beach and Thein, Delandshere, Kress, Locke, Howie, Penoyry)
- Chapters that go beyond a focus on English curriculum and pedagogy and raise questions about the social and political contexts in which teachers are currently obliged to operate. (Cambourne, Delandshere Gale, Kress, Penoyry, Singh and Han)
- Chapters by leading teacher educators about the pressures that are currently being placed on them to conform to neo-conservative ideology. (Beavins and O’Mara, Comber and Reid, Mitchell, Moni, Murray, Vurlall)
- Chapters by English educators that interrogate the understandings of language and literacy reflected in neo-conservative ideology. (Beach and Thein, Doecke, Kress, Locke, Sawyer)

A danger at the present moment, at least for those of us who might belong to the immediate post-World War 2 generation, is to react to neo-conservative ideology by nostalgically appealing to traditions of English curriculum and pedagogy that are being undermined. Yet English teachers remain the inheritors of a rich history of inquiry and curriculum innovation, and much can be gained from locating current debates within that history. To this end, we have included in this volume an essay that Gunther Kress originally published in 1996, namely ‘Reimagining English: Curriculum, Identity and Productive Futures’ (Kress 1996). In this essay, Gunther envisions a future for English vis-à-vis challenged posed by globalisation and neo-liberal economic reforms. Bill Green, drawing on his own extensive research into the history of ‘the English subjects’ (see Green and Beavis 1996, Green 2003) concludes this volume by arguing the salience of Gunther’s essay to the current moment.

Our main aim in this collection has been to avoid the sweeping and oversimplified generalisations that typify the pronouncements of neo-conservative commentators and to present a variety of contributions from teachers and academics in a diverse range of settings. Taken together the chapters in this volume should prompt readers to reflect on the nature of English teaching, schooling and community and to make connections with the specific context in which teachers work. Rather than offering simplistic solutions to the problems with which we are currently faced, the authors provide a range of starting points for reconceptualising English teaching and schooling that expose the intellectual poverty and retrograde claims of neo-conservative ideology.

References