English Teachers at Work
AATE Interface Series
Commissioning Editor: Sjota van der Hoeven

The AATE/Interface series comprises a range of books for teachers who are committed to researching their own teaching—teachers who work at the interface between theory and practice. Interface titles all have a practical edge, in that they include ideas developed in classrooms, for use in classrooms. Yet they are far more than a set of resources. The primary purpose of the AATE/Interface series is to address significant issues in English curriculum and pedagogy, and as such it represents a substantial contribution to our knowledge as English teachers and literacy educators. To date, the series consists of:

Gender & Texts: A Professional Development Package for English Teachers
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Exploring Narrative: A Guide to Teaching 'The Girl Who Married a Fly' and Other Stories
Val Kent with a contribution by Ray Misson 2000

Rehearsing the Personal in English Writing Pedagogy
Barbara Kandler with a foreword by Michelle Fine 2001

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For All Time?: Critical Issues in Teaching Shakespeare
Edited by Paul Skrebels and Sjota van der Hoeven 2002, with a foreword by John Bell

Empowering Readers: Ten Approaches to Narrative
Garry Gillard, with a foreword by Alec McHoul 2003

English Teachers at Work

NARRATIVES, COUNTER NARRATIVES AND ARGUMENTS

Edited by

Brenton Doecke, David Homer, Helen Nixon
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I'm sitting here, with head in hand
Thinking of my beloved wife.

I wanted to write you a letter, my love
To tell you how much I love you
To tell you how much I miss you.

If I could hold you
Feeling your heartbeat next to mine
Looking into your black and white eyes
And touching your sweet soft lips.

There is so much I want to say to you
But I can't
Because I can't write.

If I could I would send you an express letter
But you can't read.
How am I going to convey this message?

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And I can't write.

Clever Shikwambane

THAT WAS THEN ... THIS IS NOW

ENGLISH TEACHERS AT WORK

Brenton Doecke, David Homer, Helen Nixon

This book was conceived at an executive board meeting of the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE), Montreal, Canada, in the spring of 1983. In casting about for projects for the Federation, board members had discussed possible research seminars, digest of professional publications, and projects on topics of interest in language learning theory. At one point in the deliberations, some of us realized that the true constituents of the IFTE—teachers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England, and the United States—were being left out of the plans. Shouldn't the IFTE be concerned with teaching practices as well as with theory and research? That question led to even more interesting ones. Just what are teachers of English in these five countries doing in their classrooms? Is there any consistency in English teaching around the globe? Is there any reason to believe that the "new" English of the past two decades is finding a place in classrooms? What are the problems and frustrations experienced by teachers who implement contemporary theory in their schools? The executive board concluded that a book on run-and-bolt classroom practices written for teachers by teachers, was in order—English Teachers at Work: Ideas and Strategies from Five Countries. (Stephen Tchudi, 1986, Preface to English Teachers at Work: Ideas and Strategies from Five Countries)

So Stephen Tchudi explains the intention behind an earlier volume entitled English Teachers at Work, a collection of essays containing accounts of their professional practice by English teachers in the countries he names. A glance through this volume reveals a rich array of "ideas and strategies" used by English teachers in these countries. Peter Adams, from Meningie Area School in South Australia, gives an account of the
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power and excitement of writing as discovery’ (p. 93). Helen Watson, from Birkdale College High School in New Zealand, reflects on her efforts to meet the needs of both boys and girls in a coeducational school while maintaining ‘a feminist philosophy’ (p. 174). Jean Blunt, from Sumnerhill School in England, describes how she encourages her 14 year old students to use their experiences of school as a subject for writing (p. 116). From Edgewood School in New York we learn about Cora Frye’s efforts to integrate ‘dramatisation’ in her fifth grade classroom (p. 147), while Carol A. Stamm, from St. George’s Elementary School in Montreal, Canada, shows the value of integrating reading and writing (p. 93).

Many of the strategies described still constitute part of English teachers’ repertoires today. The authors are generally committed to making English relevant and pleasurable for their students, and they acknowledge the need to draw on popular cultural activities as a resource in their classrooms. (Jo-Anne Everingham, from Tribunia District High School in Tasmania, writes about the need to treat television as a new and challenging medium which students must learn to ‘read’, advocating a critical approach to television viewing, ‘without denying my students’ worth or tastes’ [p. 67].) Yet in revisiting this collection of essays, one is inevitably confronted by differences between the ways these authors describe ‘English teachers at work’ and the manner in which the contributors to this new volume conceptualise English teaching. And this is not simply a matter of the distance we have travelled with regard to (say) more expansive definitions of ‘text’ in English classrooms or the use of information and Communication Technologies or certain changes in the professional vocabulary with which English teachers describe their work (the contributors to English Teachers at Work: Ideas and Strategies from Five Counties are still writing about the ‘new English’, about ‘whole language’ and the ‘magical’ and ‘inspiring’ effects that Donald Graves has had on writing classrooms). Our subtitle to this volume—‘narratives, counter-narratives and arguments’—is meant to signal that professional dialogue between English teachers can no longer be simply a matter of swapping ideas and strategies to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms. That, at least, did not seem to be a valid option for us as the editors of this new volume.

Twenty years on, it is impossible not to be struck by Tchudi’s confidence about the stability of ‘English’ as a professional field that can be mapped in familiar ways, including chapters on ‘The Teaching of Literature and Reading’, ‘The Teaching of Writing’, and ‘Oral Language and Drama’. By contrast, several of the essays in the following volume present an image of English teaching that is fractured, less a stable professional field comprising what accomplished English teachers know and do, than an ongoing struggle by English teachers in various national settings to maintain their professional autonomy, most notably against government pressures to impose standardised testing and thereby radically redefine their work. In 1986 Garth Boomer could dismiss the ‘rat psychology’ embodied in ‘behaviorist learning theory … system management structures, in text books, and in testing systems’, extolling the work of English teachers who remained at ‘the cutting edge of Australian education’ (pp. 2–4). Several of the following essays show the deeply pervasive nature of standardised testing and the difficulty that it poses for teachers in their efforts to engage in ongoing critical inquiry into their teaching. But rather than simply externalising the threat posed to English teaching (‘cutting edge’ or otherwise) by ‘rat psychology’, it now seems necessary for English teachers to trace the tensions within their own teaching and to reexamine the knowledge and values that shape their professional practice.

Another significant difference between English teaching ‘then’ and ‘now’ is reflected in the way the earlier volume showcases English teaching as it is conducted in the five countries that make up the International Federation for the Teaching of English: Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and the United States. Tchudi’s book contains a section on ‘multicultural education’ that features accounts by teachers of English with Indigenous communities and students from backgrounds other than English. Those accounts reflect a familiar tension between English as a birth right (or ‘mother’ tongue) and English as an alien system of signs and sounds with which ‘non-native’ speakers are obliged to struggle. An historical memory of the complex role that English has performed in colonial societies, including the linguistic violence perpetrated by colonial administrators who used English to exercise power over populations who spoke other languages (cf. Aitchison, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989), has yet to become part of the professional knowledge of the contributors to English Teachers at Work: Ideas and Strategies from Five Countries. The forces that are currently named by ‘globalisation’ have prompted several contributors to this new volume to revisit ways in which local needs and aspirations might be met in a world ruled by ‘English’. They convey a sense of the heteroglossic nature of the communities in which teachers of English now work, and the centrifugal and centripetal forces embodied in English teaching as a cultural practice (cf. Ballin 1981).

It finally seems worthwhile reflecting on the different ways in which each volume constructs a sense of its historical moment. The contributors to the original volume are writing ‘post-Dartmouth’ (p. 5), and several refer on whether the ‘new’ English has actually had any substantial impact on the day to day practices of English teachers. After celebrating the ‘brilliant rhetoric arising from the wonderful tales told by people like James Moffett, Jimmy Britton, and Harold Rosen’, Garth Boomer questions the way this rhetoric has been ‘legitimated and made orthodox by systems’ curriculum guidelines and the journals of our English teachers’ associations’. Boomer suggests that the critical edge of the work of the writers he names may possibly be lost with their appropriation by systems (cf. David Homer’s account of these years in ‘Playing for the B Team’, a chapter in this volume). And although he claims that ‘we have convinced most teachers of what ideally they ought to be doing’, this ‘vision of a perfect
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“language and learning” classroom sometimes only serves to remind them ‘how comparatively shabby, petty, and confined their actual practice is’ (p. 3).

Many of the contributors to this new volume argue the need for English teachers to situate their work historically, and for them this means coming to terms with what Ian Reid calls the ‘persistence’ of ‘growth’ pedagogy (see Ian Reid’s chapter in this volume). We appear to have arrived at a moment when such historical revaluation is necessary—this was one of our discoveries in assembling this collection of essays. And yet this is hardly a matter of reviving ‘growth’ pedagogy, as though it is possible to side step the critiques that have been made of ‘growth’ in the intervening years, but of cultivating an awareness of the histories that continue to shape the professional lives of English teachers. Rather than the dull march of ‘tradition’, the history of English teaching reveals itself to be a rich professional field that has always been subject to competing claims and ongoing critical inquiry.

Our dialogue with Stephen Tchudi, Garth Boomer, and other contributors to *English Teachers at Work: Ideas and Strategies from Five Countries* reflects the historically situated nature of our work as English teachers. For it is not as though we have moved beyond them. To ask who Garth Boomer meant by the ‘we’ who ‘convinced most teachers of what they ought to be doing’ would be to unravel his claims about the silence of the ‘new’ English. Has there ever been a group of teachers (in Australia or elsewhere) who have been capable of taking ‘political, collective action’ to offset ‘the worst effects of systems’, as he puts it earlier in his essay? (pp. 3-4) Yet rather than imagining that we have somehow reached a more sophisticated understanding than his own, we are brought up against the realisation that the contradictions revealed by his own ‘rhetoric’—between what ‘is’ and what ‘ought’ to be, between those teachers who constitute the ‘cutting edge’ of education and the rank who are doing the hard slog, between the worlds opened up by theory and the material ordinariness of chairs and desks and other things—still shape our own professional discourse. None of the essays and stories presented in *English Teachers at Work: Narratives, Counter Narratives and Arguments* pretend to resolve those contradictions. Rather, they present rich accounts of professional practice that show teachers’ continuing efforts to engage in critical inquiry into their own teaching.

**References**

