

Professional Learning

English teachers: a diverse community of learners

English teachers come to teaching with very different biographies. They tend to give very different accounts of themselves as learners in secondary English classrooms. Some thoroughly relished their English and/or Literature learning and would like future students to share in the joys similarly. Others recall their time as learners in secondary English classes with ... less enthusiasm. Amongst their reasons for becoming English teachers is a desire to provide a richer more enjoyable English classroom than they experienced. English/literature studies at university are remembered very differently by different teachers.

Pre-service students have invariably traveled diverse academic pathways on their way to their teacher education courses. Some have completed three years of an undergraduate degree in various discipline areas (in a BA, BMus, BSc, BEc) and are now 'doing a DipEd', and some are completing a degree that has combined discipline studies with education studies from the outset. Different teacher education settings themselves are not monolithic in their approaches. These differences in academic pathways serve to deepen the diversity of backgrounds that pre-service teachers bring to their learning to become a teacher.

And yet, despite our different biographies and cultures, most of us share a love of reading texts of many different kinds. In this respect, at least, English teachers are similar. This mix of homogeneity and heterogeneity is not unusual in teacher education institutions; indeed, it is characteristic of most English teaching communities

DISCUSSION POINT: There is something seductive about communities being united and speaking with one voice. We often hear politicians or policy makers hankering for a 'common language' in education broadly and in teacher education especially. What do you see as the benefits and dangers of such a 'common language'?

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Negotiating the sameness and the tensions (Bakhtin)

The inevitable mix of sameness and diversity amongst communities of preservice teachers, like professional teachers, can inspire a profound appreciation for the value of difference, and it can also be a source of acute tensions, creatively, socially and professionally. Needless to say this mix does not dissolve when one enters a school or other teaching and learning setting. One might argue that negotiating this mix is a fundamental part of all teachers' work.

The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin speaks of all social activity involving such a mix. In fact, he describes this mix as a constant dynamic, a **dialogic** movement backward and forward between tension and resolution. On the one hand, it may feel like, as one early career teacher remembers her pre-service education, ‘a cacophony of voices that seemed to be competing for my attention at any given time.’ This is consistent with Bakhtin’s notion of [heteroglossia](#). It suggests that part of teacher’s learning involves an eking out professional identity amid a vast and teeming diversity of voices all struggling to be heard and to influence a teacher’s identity. For more discussion of Bakhtin’s ideas you may like to go to:

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~honey1/bakhtin/chap2b.html>

On the other hand, this dynamic mix might appear as a continuous dialogic struggle between those factors that might transform diversity into a more unified sameness – eg. to take a class of diverse learners and have them produce similar ‘products’ as required by a curriculum document (or an exam) – and those factors that might transform potential sameness into a richer mix of diversity – eg. to take a single curriculum document and explore the multifarious ways in which teachers and learners may work with this curriculum to produce vastly different products and different learning. In the first instance at least, and in different educational contexts, one can see the value of each of these tendencies.

Centripetal tendencies

(ie. tending to produce sameness)



Centrifugal tendencies

(ie. tending to produce diversity)

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Connections between professional and student learning communities

Certainly, in any community of professional or pre-service English teachers, like any social group, this dynamic movement, this movement to and from sameness or diversity, is always present. An awareness of this dynamic might help to explain how any individual teacher or pre-service teacher responds to a professional learning situation.

Here is one teacher’s explanation of these sorts of tensions in her own professional learning group:

We all had different degrees of strength [in our subject area]. But we had to get comfortable with each other and really put it on the line. Hey, we don’t really all know everything here. We are all going to approach these problems differently. And recognise that there is a parallel to what our kids are going through.

quoted in *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters* (2001, p. 39)

As this teacher suggests, English and literacy teachers' critical awareness of this in their own professional learning can have powerful benefits in the way they understand and deal with these tensions in the groups of students they teach.

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What are pre-service teachers learning and how are they learning?

As pre-service teachers enter the final year of formal structured learning before entering the teaching profession, their focus may tend to be on the content that they will be teaching. In many ways that's not surprising. Deborah Britzman writes (in *Practice makes practice*, 2003) of the state of insecurity, anxiety and responsibility that pre-service teachers regularly experience: they need to know it all, they feel they'll be judged by their students and supervisors as to how much they know, and yet they acutely appreciate the impossibility of knowing it all. Certainly the rhetoric about essential knowledge and essential learning that teachers should be teaching is encouraging this insecurity.

It is interesting that the website of the Standards for the Teaching of English Language and Literacy in Australia (www.stella.org.au) presents the need for teachers to 'know their students' above the need to 'know their subject'. In fact, the website, like several other iterations of professional standards, breaks up teachers' knowledge into three categories:

STELLA Standard Statements

- [Teachers know their students](#)
- [Teachers know their subject](#)
- [Teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate](#)

James Britton (1970) also thinks about teachers' knowledge more in terms of knowledge about particular students. He speaks in terms of needing to 'begin from where the [students] are' (p. 134). In terms of the teacher quoted above, it means constantly making the connection between what teachers are 'going through' and what 'what our kids are going through' and what they have gone through in the past.

DISCUSSION POINT: It could be argued that the notion of essential knowledge in English assumes

(1) that there is a body of important knowledge in English that exists and which people agree on,

(2) that this body of knowledge exists independent of learners' construction of that knowledge, and

(3) that this knowledge exists independent of the particular socio-cultural setting

of different student learners.

Also you might feel that it implies that English knowledge must be transmitted to students. To what extent do you agree with these views? Would you like to contest those assumptions? How?

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Teachers learning how to know their students?

Perhaps teachers knowing their students is just a matter of taking the time to get to know them, or 'having the knack.' And yet, if teachers knowing their students is so important in teaching, then perhaps there is more to learn about this part of teaching than spending more time at it or just 'having the knack.'

DISCUSSION POINT : If you are in your pre-service year as you read this, you might like to speculate about the sort of students you believe you will be teaching in schools. Early career and more experienced teachers, you may like to recall your expectations of the students you were going to teach and the extent to which these expectations were met or not.

In the following quote from a reflective narrative written by an experienced teacher about her practice, she speaks about what had seemed to her to be an unusual group of Year 9 students:

The first few days were a learning period as we both had lots to learn about each other. They weren't the *usual* students to have in class as most of them had definite ideas about what they wanted to do in the workforce after leaving school, and were already well on the way to getting there. They wanted 'practical stuff', they told me, not school stuff that wasn't going to do them any good.

Ruth Graham

Read the whole narrative from the STELLA website at:

http://www.stella.org.au/narrative_content.jsp?id=23

DISCUSSION POINT : Do you see these students as 'usual' in your experience? An vignette or anecdote is often an effective way to illustrate your view about this.

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Professional learning: obligation or accomplishment?

Traditionally, during their final year of a teacher education degree, pre-service teachers talk about the strange contradictions of identity they feel: they are, during one week, students at university (in lecture theatres and workshops, often with little ownership over their learning) and then, in the next week, professionals in schools with some degree of professional autonomy in a classroom). In one sense it is best to acknowledge this problematic ‘dual identity,’ and yet many experienced teachers also speak of their sense of being a learner and a teacher throughout their career. Perhaps the pre-service duality in identity is not peculiar to these early years. At the very least, it is worth reflecting on the apparent dichotomy between learning (at university) and doing (at school). Preservice teachers are often very conscious of how quickly they are learning while on teaching rounds in schools, and can sometimes draw pejorative comparisons with the learning they are doing at university.

Teacher educators would like to think that learning at university does not always have to feel like it is constructed by others for ‘neophyte’ teachers just to ingest and accept. Rather, they often express a desire that their teaching students can construct their understandings of teaching and learning in a similar way to the dynamic, collaborative learning that Ruth Graham (quoted above) constructed her professional learning identity.

Consider also how [Prue Gill](#), a highly experienced teacher, talks about the collaborative nature of her first year of teaching. Initially, she is talking about a close team-teaching, mentoring dynamic that operated between her and a more experienced colleague, but she goes on to frame her learning throughout her career in similar terms with a range of colleagues:

We shared the majority of our teaching each class – if my partner prepared one text in detail, I prepared another. We negotiated all our planning and preparation. We worked out where our strengths lay, and what we could learn from each other. This was so very different from the sink or swim approach that so often characterizes young teachers’ first experiences. It was a wonderful way to start an apprenticeship.

And when did the apprenticeship end? I’m not sure that it has. I learn or re-learn constantly.

Prue Gill, teacher of thirty years experience, talking about her first year of English teaching
(So, you want to become an English teacher?, *English in Australia*, 126, p. 26.)

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School (university) stuff' and 'practical stuff'

On the one hand, throughout the western world newly established regulatory bodies such as the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), in Australia, are already requiring teachers to demonstrate that they are learning professionally, from their first year of teaching. One of the professional standards needing to be 'met' if one is to be registered as a professional teacher in Victoria refers to teachers' obligation in terms of their professional learning. Teachers must demonstrate that they:

identify their own professional learning needs and plan for and engage in professional development activities.

VIT- Standards of Professional Practice for Full Registration
<http://www.vit.vic.edu.au/pdfs/Standards.pdf>

Very recently, the government body in Victoria has mandated a set of seven 'Principles of Professional Learning', which oblige teachers not just to demonstrate that they are learning. They must demonstrate that their learning is not at all self-interested and 'irrelevant to their teaching' [sic.].

[Professional Learning in Effective Schools](#)

In some places throughout the world, especially in the USA, the effectiveness of every individual teacher's professional learning is measured against clearly delineated, visible and demonstrable improvements in their students' learning outcomes. It's worth considering the consequences on teachers' sense of professional identity in this sort of environment.

Another view of professional learning is that it can not, and should not, be forced, and that threatening punitive consequences for teachers failing to demonstrate their attainment of narrowly articulated professional learning outcomes is likely to inhibit teachers' professional learning, not encourage it. The argument goes like this: richer forms of professional learning tend to emerge differently from different local contexts; they cannot be centrally prescribed or controlled. Professional learning can be a central dynamic of teachers' intellectual professional life and offers ongoing opportunities for development and renewal of teaching practice. As the STELLA standards articulate it, teachers who are continually reflecting on and taking responsibility for their professional learning are demonstrating that they are accomplished English teachers.

Accomplished English/literacy teachers recognize that the context of their teaching is continually evolving.... With their own learning goals in mind, accomplished English/literacy teachers pursue new knowledge through professional renewal activities such as classroom-based action-research, professional reading, academic study, discussion and debate with colleagues and participation in conferences and workshops.

STELLA, 3.2 - [Teachers continue to learn](#)

DISCUSSION POINT : Do you feel professional learning should be, or can be, mandated, and therefore forced, in teachers' lives? Two questions for early career or more experienced teachers: 'What are some of the richest professional learning experiences you have had?' and 'To what extent were they the result of professionally mandated directives?'

Now compare this scenario with the students in Ruth Graham's class who rejected the notion of 'school stuff' and who, instead, wanted 'practical stuff.' If you were teaching Ruth's class, would you be wanting to send your students out into the world only having given them practical stuff? Perhaps you have an expectation that this course had better include 'practical stuff', and not 'university stuff that isn't going to do you any good' - or else! Some people see the range of thinking about teaching and learning, and all education, as falling into two easily distinguishable categories. They tend not to refer to it as 'school stuff' and 'practical stuff', but this is I think what they mean when they speak of theory and practice. The implication behind this binary is that these are two separate and discrete notions. Has this been your experience so far?

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Writing critically reflexive narratives as a focus for professional learning

In pre-service education courses throughout the world, students are invited to write reflective narratives in which they reflect critically on their journey toward English teaching. Teachers also do this throughout their careers, as part of their ongoing professional learning.

Consider these two memories of learning English in secondary school that emerged out of pre-service students' critically reflective narratives at Monash:

High school English for me was the site of contestation. We battled sometimes violently to have our individual and differing values accepted. Thrashing out ideas, thrashing one another's beliefs, drawing blood with claws of reasoning. We were kangaroos resting on tails/tails of personal experience, leaning back and kicking our opposition (each other) full in the face with carefully aimed retorts.... English was the class that brought us together from various interest areas and talents. Sometimes we would emerge with bloodied ears, fur falling, our egos and tails bruised. Why? Because in any search for meaning, core is shaken, values are called into question. And at that age in those classes we were validating our own existences. We were asking the big questions: Who do I want to be? What kind of me? Where do I want to be? And who do I want with me?

Pippa Kirwan
Pre-service teacher (2003)

When I was in high school, English was a strictly and narrowly defined subject. Students worked individually. We listened and wrote things down. We studied texts and wrote answers to questions. We interpreted. This kind of atmosphere, without any group, hands-on or interactive work, had many consequences. Students who were interested and ‘intellectual’ excelled. They dove into the text and deconstructed it, analysed it, worked through it, began to develop their own thoughts and feelings about it. They build a world in their minds. Other students were bored. They sank into the text and ploughed through it, doing just enough work to get the marks they wanted. They found interest in some parts, boredom in others. They could answer the questions set by the teacher and pass.

Andrew Drummond
Pre-service teacher (2003)

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Critical inquiry as professional learning

Clearly, everyone’s experience of secondary English will be different. That is very interesting in its own way. More interesting, though, will be the ways in which pre-service teachers and more experienced teachers unpack these experiences, the ways they critically inquire into the significance of their journey toward and through English teaching. To do this will no doubt involve looking carefully at what you do in the classroom, why you do, what your students do and why they do it. However, it should also look beyond the narrowly practical, to see how any action or situations is grounded within a complex and ever-changing combination of socio-cultural phenomena and traditions. It will be generative to:

- Inquire into and critique the *values* of the educational systems (local and global, institutional and policy) within which you are and were learning; and
- Identify and critically inquire into the *beliefs* of the people from whom you are and were learning (colleagues and teachers, past and present). This notion of *collaborative critical inquiry* or *dialogic inquiry* has the potential to generate (or perhaps just bring to a clear focus) the most powerful parts of your learning throughout your professional career.

For further reading about the nature of this inquiry, you might like to consider some of the following resources:

- Gordon Wells’s essay, ‘Dialogic inquiry in education: Building on the legacy of Vygotsky’
<http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/~gwells/NCTE.html>)
- Wells’s book, *Dialogic Inquiry: Toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education* (1999).

- Lev Vygostky's *Thought and language* (1986, MIT press)
- Mikhail Bakhtin's, Discourse in the novel, in *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (1981)
- Parr, G. and Bellis, N. (2005) Autobiographical inquiry in pre-service and early career teacher learning, in Doecke and Parr (eds) *Writing=Learning, Kent Town, SA: AATE and Wakefield Press.*

All this concentrating on your own experiences and reflecting on these, even critically inquiring into these with others, may sound narrowly introspective to you and a bit too good to be true. You may be thinking: 'Ok, I need experiences, and I need to think about them. Once I've done that I'm fine, yeah? I'm ready to teach!' Mmm. If only it were that simple. Experience is a rich resource for professional learning. But just as overseas travel does not necessarily result in rich learning about the world by all travelers, so too we think you will find that experience of teaching and learning, in its 'raw' state (ie. without informed critical, dialogic and reflexive scrutiny) does not ensure rich learning about teaching.

The images and beliefs that prospective teachers bring to their preservice preparation serve as filters for making sense of the knowledge and experiences they encounter. They may also function as barriers to change by limiting the ideas that teacher education students are able and willing to entertain.... These taken-for-granted beliefs may mislead prospective teachers into thinking that they know more about teaching than they actually do and make it harder for them to form new ideas and new habits of thought and action...

Teacher candidates must also form visions of what is possible and desirable in teaching to inspire and guide their professional learning and practice. Such visions connect important values and goals to concrete classroom practices. They help teachers construct a normative basis for developing and assessing their teaching and their students' learning.'

S. Feiman-Nemser From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching, (2001, p.)