VOICES

Some voices from the profession

Here are several different voices from the broader community of English literacy educators in Victoria, Australia, talking about their different work settings, their professional knowledge and/or their professional identity.

Natalie Bellis

"… [My Yr 10 students and I] left the classroom and trooped off to the park next to the school grounds, to enact our own version of a *Dead Poets Society* meeting, during which they would share their oral presentations. My vision of us all having a Thoreau-like moment amidst the gum trees did not really come to fruition. I was largely disappointed with what I felt were limited attempts at creativity, and wondered where I had gone wrong.

Then, on the second last day of term I watched the same class present their research into an Aboriginal issue or aspect of culture. The standard was fantastic, but I was most impressed with the creative way that many students chose to share their ideas. One group performed an entertaining role play of a Dreamtime myth, a couple of groups incorporated visual images through their use of PowerPoint, another group asked the class to close their eyes while they helped them to imagine an Aboriginal ceremony (complete with music), another group conducted an interview with footballer Michael Long (complete with costumes), and another group explored the concept of racism by symbolically rearranging the room.

It was a great lesson, for me most of all, because I realized that just because the results of learning are not immediately apparent does not mean that the seeds have not been planted."
(Bellis, *English Teaching: Practice and Critique, 3.2,* Sept. 2004. Click here to access the full hypertext:
http://www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/english/ETPC/narrative/html/BellisPP_files/frame.htm)

Prue Gill

"One of the luxuries of teaching senior students is that it is quite easy to break down some of the formal and artificial barriers that commonly exist in schools. My students wander into class – sometimes a little early, sometimes a little late. They bring their recess talk with them, and I like that. They flick in and out of personal chat as they prepare for what we will be doing in Literature. It may take 10 minutes to set up the class (which, admittedly, is 75 minutes long). In the context of my particular institution, that can make me uneasy, but I see such informality as a way of learning about each other, and hence as contributing to our ability to have a conversation about an idea or a text or a piece of writing. Strict boundaries are so 'naturalised' in schools, that it is easy to be nervous of blurring them. I have to remind myself how artificial the bell is, how artificial the notion that we're only working when we're doing something formal. I like to value the 'liminal spaces' – what I earlier refer to as 'border' territory - as being productive. I tell my students that my mother broke her

hip, that I've spent the night in hospital, that I saw a good film, that I am outraged by something in the press. They do the same. And then when they email me they often add – 'hope the weekend is good', or ask 'how's your mother'?"
(*Writing = Learning,* 2005, p. 153)

Bella Illesca

Bella had been teaching a particular grouping of students, a year 9 literacy class, who had been withdrawn from mainstream English classes to address what was labeled their 'deficiency' in English. Her narrative tells the story of how together they (teachers and students) managed to subvert this sort of labeling. She is talking here about the changes in these students by the end of the year.

"Paul's [significantly improved] attendance, [his] creativity and enthusiasm for the work we were doing in this Year 9 literacy class was much more than 'good fun'. The 'fun' and 'easy' time that Paul [talked about] stemmed from being engaged in interesting and challenging literacy practices that acknowledged his situated history, experiences, beliefs, and the characteristic ways in which he used oral and written language to communicate with others in the classroom. In this class he knew that he did not have to struggle on alone because learning did not have to be an individual activity, but something that happened with and between people. He came to feel that he had something to offer to the learning in which everyone was participating and that he was capable of authoring his own experiences through his writing in a way that would have significance for others. These students perceived their learning as 'fun' and enjoyable because they were working out of spaces and within social relationships that did not define them according to what they could *not* do, but by their potential. Certainly, they still farted, chewed gum, made loud noises and gave each other 'nipple cramps,' but through their writing they also demonstrated a wonderful capacity for being clever, funny, ironic, honest, inspiring and so many other things that cannot be captured in any single account [or test] of their achievements." (*Writing = Learning*, 2005, p. 179)
[See also Bella's article in *English reaching: Practice and critique, 3.3,* Dec. 2004. Click here to access it: http://www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/english/ETPC/narrative/pdf/2004v3n3nar3.pdf]

Douglas McLenaghan and Brenton Doecke

"Many English teachers create opportunities for young people to explore popular culture in their classrooms. This does not mean aping their tastes and enthusiasms, but attending to the way popular culture mediates their social relationships and the formation of their identities. You need only wander around shopping centres on weekends to find young people immersed in a range of activities, from lining up with huge boxes of popcorn at the latest Hollywood blockbuster to singlemindedly pounding the machines in games parlours. Not content to occupy one place and live through one moment, they simultaneously chat into their mobile phones or text-message people located elsewhere. They talk and laugh excitedly, parading their allegiances and identities in a veritable Shakespearean display.

Young people inhabit a rich semiotic environment, full of songs, dialects, slang, corporate logos, cross-gartered vanities, mustachioed Violas and other personalities: 'A great while ago the world begun, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain…'. It is vital that English teachers cultivate a sensitivity to the cultural practices in which adolescents engage in their everyday lives and that they open up a space for young people to explore the meaning-making potential of those practices in their classrooms. The challenge for English teachers is to break down the divide between school

literacy practices and youth culture, providing a curriculum that matches the richness of the semiotic practices in which young people participate outside schools." (*W=L,* p. 247)
[See also Doug's narrative in *English teaching: practice and critique, 2.2,* Sept. 2003. Click here to access the narrative:
http://www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/english/ETPC/detail.lasso?id=38]

Judie Mitchell
The following excerpt was written in the days before official curriculums talked about authentic rich tasks as in the much heralded new curriculum in Victoria, Australua – ie. Essential learning standards (ELS) – with its emphasis on exploring and enhancing links between curricular domains and disciplines. It will be interesting to see how, or to what extent, Judie's concerns are addressed in the day-to-day lived curriculum of ELS.

"Many of us struggle with the problem of the cut-up curriculum in secondary schools. The divisions between subjects and periods means that kids don't transfer their learning. In English, this seems unbelievably absurd. If ever there were understandings and skills that needed to be transferred, those learned in English are surely top of the list. Many students still do not carry their learned essay skills, for example, from one subject to another. My students do not carry their 'learned' punctuation skills from many years of exercises into their writing. Making links is a powerful learning tool, but our school system militates against what is, I believe, a natural human behaviour." (in Doecke, ed., *Responding to students' writing,* 1999, p. 113)

David Lee
"…the current pre-occupation with outcomes-based assessment, for purposes of public accountability, as well as for reporting individual students' achievements, runs the risk of distracting attention from formative assessment practices that are directed to enhancing student learning. When [I enter] a conversation with a student about the student's progress as a writer, and when that conversation is focused on a range of pieces, [I] may well have notions of outcomes – what knowledges and skills the student has demonstrated – as a framework for reporting the student's achievement. But the purpose of entering into such conversations, and creating opportunities for them to occur, has far more to do with encouraging students as reflective and active participants in their own learning than it does with reporting student achievement.' (*Responding to students' writing,* 1999, p. 107)
[Cf. also the 'Assessment or learning' website developed by the Curriculum Corporation, at http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/assessment/default.asp.]

Scott Bulfin
"I have tried, sometimes successfully and at others times unsuccessfully, to invite students into a different sort of dialogic relationship, what others have argued is a reframing of curriculum as communication or as a conversation (cf Barnes 1976; Applebee 1996). This is more than an end of semester chance to 'get the teacher

back.' I encourage students to continue the conversations we begin in class, outside class, whether in the corridor, via email, online chat, blogs, or whatever medium is available. I want to suggest that when students have an opportunity to do these things there are important and beneficial flow-on effects; certainly for classroom relationships and dynamics, and for students' confidence, and sometimes for their desire to engage *each other* about issues that bear some relevance to their lives in and out-of-school. I also hope that in encouraging students to talk and write to me often about our classes, informally, *we* might begin to carve out a space where they do not feel they have to tell me what they think I want to hear. I hope that they can 'try on' different voices and find one that fits (or several), all the while letting their thoughts and talk move and shape around the ideas swirling in their conversations and around their lives." (In press, 2006)

Are there any issues about teaching identity or teacher knowledge that these teachers raise here that you'd like to comment on?

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Voice and teacher narrative

The issues of professional identity and teacher voice have been important in English teaching communities for many years. The burgeoning interest in teacher narrative as a way to inquire into and 'story' teacher knowledge and identity, has sometimes tended to celebrate the 'voice' of the teacher. We can think of the work of Clandinin and Connelly (Monash users click here to access chapter http://images.lib.monash.edu.au/edf6001/04109970.pdf)

> One theory of educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. …. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories (p. 2).
>
> (Stories of experience and narrative inquiry, *Educational Researcher*, *19.5*, June / July 1990, p. 2)

Have you found it worthwhile to read other teachers' narratives? What teacher narratives have you found valuable or meaningful in reflecting on your professional work and lives? Can you provide a few sentences to explain how it has been valuable or meaningful for you?

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Teacher stories as contribution to professional conversation

For many of us, telling (and writing) stories *about* our practice and our professional identity constitutes a valuable form of professional conversation. Kathy Carter (1993) explains what she sees as the significance of this story telling in her research in recent years:

> With increasing frequency over the past several years we, as members of a community of investigator-practitioners, have been telling stories about teaching and teacher education rather than simply reporting correlation coefficients or generating lists of findings. This trend has been upsetting to some who mourn the loss of quantitative precision and, they would argue, scientific rigour. For many of us, however, these stories capture, more than scores or mathematical formulae ever can, the richness and indeterminacy of our experiences as teachers and the complexity of our understandings of what teaching is and how others can be prepared to engage in this profession.

(The place of story in the study of teaching and teacher education,
Educational Researcher, *22.1* ,Jan.-Feb., 1993, p. 5)

The sort of story-telling to which Carter is referring here could be corridor conversations, a quick parley around a school printer, or a quick email response to a question raised in an email discussion list. All these could have a place in teacher conversations about their work. Beyond this, however, the mode of 'story' that perhaps best articulates the 'richness' or 'indeterminacy' or 'complexity' that Carter is referring to often requires the written word to do it full justice. And Carter, like many others, argue that when teachers story their lives, when they articulate a sense of their professional self in their narratives, can have a liberating and empowering effect on teachers and individuals and as a profession.

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Language mediating teacher voice in narratives (i)

Anthony Petrosky (1994) provides a counter-narrative of narrative-as-a-search-for-truth. He challenges what he calls 'essentialist' notions of teacher knowledge as 'a collection of discrete truths.' Rather, he argues, 'Knowledge is… what people produce in and with discourse in response to problems' (p. 24)

(Petrosky, 1994, Producing and assessing knowledge: beginning to understand teachers' knowledge through the work of four theorists, in T. Shanahan (ed.) *Teachers thinking, teachers knowing: Reflections on literacy and language education,* Urbana, IL, NCTE, pp. 23- 38.)

We should note that Petrosky's perspective is not a romantic one. Teachers should not be seen as innocently *using the tool* of language to *produce* some objective notion of truth or some essentialist knowledge in their narrative. As he stresses, the discourse in and with which teachers write, is also operating to produce the voice or the knowledge or the identity of the text (or the writer of the text).

> Teachers … create knowledge with language within a particular educational discourse in response to various open-ended problems they solve, and they are also created as teachers and thinkers by the language they use within that particular educational discourse.
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> Petrosky, 1994, p. 25.

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Language mediating teacher voice in narratives (ii)

So, it is important to realise that the notion of teacher voice is not a simple or unproblematic one. Barbara Kamler (in *Relocating the personal,* 2001) summarises one aspect of the poststructuralist critique of teacher narrative, quoting Timothy Lensmire:

> Lensmire (1998) argues, like many poststructural feminist scholars, that to assume a stable pre-existent self that can be expressed in writing is to assume that language itself is simply a tool for that expression, a neutral vehicle for making and expressing pre-existent meaning—rather than a site of struggle where subjectivity and meaning are produced. It is to ignore that the act of writing does not simply express a self, but has serious effects on the self that is writing. It is to ignore, further, that writers are not isolated individuals pursuing personal meaning but are embedded in social relations of gender, race, class and sexuality that influence the work of writing and creating a self.
>
> Kamler (2001, p. 38)

Ivor Goodson (2003) is one of many researchers and teacher-researchers who argue for the need to critically situate any teacher narrative within clearly articulated socio-political context. He advocates the construction of 'life histories':

> A new collaborative mode [of teacher narrative] focusing on the teacher's life and work, but retaining a reflective critical and theoretical dimension is required, and faculties of education must play a proactive part (*Professional knowledge, professional lives : studies in education and change,* 2003, p. 14).

In fact, Goodson (like Wells, 2001, 2004; see also Wells's on-line article about dialogic inquiry : www.oise.utoronto.ca/~gwells/NCTE.html) sees great dangers in the uncritical celebration of the individual teacher voice, since it can so easily be dismissed as purely individual, idiosyncratic. Thus, he explains, even if the voice is potentially critical of destructive managerialist practices, systems or policy, it can easily be dismissed as idiosyncratic and peculiar to a particular setting, and of no bigger significance. (See also Parr and Bellis's chapter, titled 'Autobiographical inquiry in pre-service and early-career teacher learning: the dialogic possibilities,' in *Writing = learning,* edited by Doecke and Parr, 2005.)

What do you think about the notion of teacher voice in teacher narratives? Do you agree with Lensmire or Kamler or Goodson? Do you have any reservations about celebrating the teacher's voice in teacher narratives?

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Contesting the notion of 'voice' in teacher narratives

Barbara Kamler (2001), in her recent book, *Relocating the personal,* is advocating the use of narratives in teachers' on-going professional learning. She, too, argues the need to situate any narrative within its cultural and socio-political context. But she is suspicious of the use of the term 'voice' with respect to teacher narratives (including those which might be constructed for and within this website). She believes that it is not only simplifying and romanticizing the act of writing, but that it can thwart the very emancipatory intention behind teachers writing narratives.

She draws on the argument of Pam Gilbert to problematise the notion of voice in narrative

> Metaphors of speech, because they imply delivery by a human voice, act discursively to naturalise personal writing as more authentic 'personal, individual, spontaneous, natural, truthful, involved, emotional, real' (Gilbert, 1990, pp. 60-61). Metaphors of story … can be used to disrupt the links between the personal and the authentic
> (Kamler, 2001, *Relocating the personal,* p. 45).

She goes on to argue that the focus should be a critical one, but honing in on the story or narrative as *text*, rather than the 'voice in the text':

> Metaphorically, story allows a more textual orientation than voice, a close attention to what is written (rather than who has written)—to the actual text—and the contexts in which it is produced. … [A] critical lens to the production and enactment of texts and suggests a whole new set of educational practices. These include a greater self-consciousness about how narratives area told, how they are made, how they might be written differently, how they support, undermine and struggle with other stories, how their writing affects the teller and the told
> (Kamler, 2001, *Relocating the personal,* p. 45).

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Teacher conversation as counterpoint

It is interesting to consider the implications of Kamler's distrust of the metaphor of voice. For instance, how would you see this idea with respect to broader notions of professional *conversation* or *dialogue* through narrative? It might be interesting to follow the way that Kamler's research pursues these ideas in coming years.

Edward Said, writing as part of a larger discipline of cultural studies, is perhaps most famous for his post-colonialist work, *Orientalism,* first published in 1978. He is interested in language and power and the way dominating cultures have oppressed and silenced less dominant cultures in all socio-political contexts throughout the world. His work is pertinent, here, if we are interested in the liberating potential of teacher voices, in professional conversation and in narratives, against those political or administrative forces that would seek to dominate or even silence the voices of teachers in education debates.

Whereas Kamler draws attention to the metaphorical connections of voice to the human body, Edward Said thinks of voice in musical terms, and alludes at one point to voice in socio-cultural interactions as part of a 'polyphony of voices.' Said later invokes the metaphor of 'counterpoint' to represent the ways in which language, in any one communicative act, is always a play of voices connecting and responding to other voices. Parr and Bellis (2005, in Doecke and Parr's *Writing = Learning*) further consider the potential for professional learning of this sort of musical discourse. They quote the definition of 'counterpoint' from a musical dictionary:

> The term 'counterpoint' … is used to describe music in which the chief interest lies in the various strands [or voices] that make up the texture, and particularly in the combination of these strands and their relationship to each other and the texture as a whole.
> (*Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 5th ed., vol. 2*)

If you have written some teacher narratives – perhaps you have written about a classroom episode – it may be interesting to reflect on the different 'voices' who are 'speaking' to you (and within you) in order that you may speak to, communicate with your reader. On the other hand, it's worth thinking about the way readers respond to and construct meaning with your narrative. A reader might find some aspects of your story familiar, or perhaps a sharp contrast to her/his experience or setting. The extent to which he/she connects with this narrative is influenced by various intersections in terms of experience. But it is also richly influenced (mediated) by the interconnections in terms of discourse and the way different language makes sense to different groups of people. The very richly layered and dialogic nature of language, means that all constructions of meaning derive from the dynamic interchanges that a metaphor such as a musical counterpoint brings to mind.

Are there other metaphors for 'voice,' such as might be emerging in your own teacher narrative, that you find meaningful or interesting?