

## **What am I doing and where am I going? Conversations with beginning English teachers**

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*ABSTRACT: This paper explores conversations between beginning English teachers about their experiences during their first year of teaching. These teachers are all located at the same school, and in their conversations they share their thoughts and feelings about their common struggle to make sense of the English curriculum they found at this school. As a beginning teacher myself (I am in my third year of teaching), I discuss my own experiences, positioning myself within the paper as part of this “novice” teaching community, and interpreting their conversations from this perspective. The paper seeks to draw out their feelings about their emerging professional identity as English teachers, and the challenges they have faced in their first year of teaching.*

*KEY WORDS: Beginning teaching, English teaching, professional identity, English curriculum, pedagogical content knowledge.*

*I had grand visions of the type of teacher I was going to be when I finally got out of pre-service training. Following in the footsteps of Robin Williams I was going to dazzle my students with my passion for English and in turn they were going to overwhelm me with their enthusiasm and hidden talents. It didn't happen like this at all! I sucked, according to my kids!*

Quote from a first year English teacher at a Victorian Association of the Teaching of English, (VATE) conference during 2002.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The search for meaning as a beginning English teacher is a difficult and often disappointing task. What is the purpose of teaching English to a group of students who couldn't care less about it? Why aren't all students captivated by their teacher's enthusiasm for English? The experience described by the beginning teacher above relates to the nature of English teaching as well as the person's feelings of self-worth and professional identity. Over the past few months I have been engaging in research with beginning teachers and their experiences as they find their way in the profession. I have heard repeated voices of frustration and anxiety about the teaching of English and the perceived lack of progress felt by these teachers. My research would suggest that this is a time in which perceptions about teaching as a whole and the type of teachers they wish to be are changing.

### **SECOND YEAR – AM I A PROFESSIONAL YET?**

I currently work at a large, outer Melbourne state high school, “Mountain H.S”. I have found this school to be a supportive, caring and enjoyable place to work. The

English Faculty, especially the co-ordinator, has been a huge help to me as a beginning teacher. They have offered resources, advice about students and a friendly chat throughout my time there. The principal and assistant principals are also supportive and understanding.

As a beginning English teacher and researcher I am close to the participants in my study. Therefore, it is important to give some insight into my own experiences as a beginning teacher. This lays bare my own perceptions of the profession and allows a degree of critique about my analysis and commentary about the beginning English teachers discussed in this essay. My experiences as a second-year teacher will obviously impact to a degree on my research and the questions posed to the participants.

The research for my PhD influences this paper to a degree. The research conducted for this paper follows the same theme as the larger project. Both take the form of a self-study, as I am monitoring my own professional growth as time progresses. Comparisons with other beginning teachers I talk to are inevitable. For example, the group of teachers in this paper is one step behind me on our collective journey to professional accomplishment, so to speak. Therefore I am situated in this way during the conversations and the discussion in this paper. I am looking at their experiences from a perspective of having been there, done that. However, this does not mean that I am a polished professional by any means.

Walking along the corridor at school on the first day back as a second year teacher an older, more experienced colleague turned to me and said,

This is old hat for you now, isn't it? You know the ropes, what to do, it's like riding a bike, isn't it?

“Pam”, the teacher who made this comment is a large, grandmotherly type woman. She is well liked among the staff and the students and she gave my arm a friendly, if not collegial, squeeze as she said this. I received the impression that I was still seen as “new” and still very much a learner from this episode. It was as though Pam was trying to reassure me that I was a teacher now and not just pretending like last year. I actually had not given much thought to what second-year teaching would be like.

I thought about it after this comment and realised that, to an extent, she was right. The analogy of riding a bike was very true. Not to all aspects of teaching but to the parts which had flustered me in first year, namely administration and student management; I knew what to do now. I now knew what I had to teach and when. I found that the students accepted me as part of the school and that I handled disciplinary matters with a degree of skill that I was surprised at. Thinking about this, I wondered when the point was that I had begun to feel more comfortable about my role within the school community. Although I was obviously still at the start of my professional journey, I had become conscious that I had learnt many things over the previous twelve months or so. Some of my teaching practice had become second nature, leaving me to wonder how and when this had happened.

For the next few weeks I tried to watch myself objectively in my classroom, analysing why I just did that or said this. Would I have said or did that last year? Needless to

say this was quite challenging to do and teach twenty-five Year 7s at the same time. So I began to ask my peers also in their second year of teaching about their feelings. This group of teachers is in the same position as me. They feel that they have all learnt so much but cannot pinpoint the when and how of this process. “Louise”, an English teacher commented,

I don't really know, it's all up here (taps her head), I can't explain it, it just happens.

The gesture of head tapping seems to invoke an image of a much older, experienced teacher. The implication that most of her learning and knowledge was tacit is a concept that I am concerned about – how can this apparent assumption of professionalism not be explained? This answer and the variations of it that followed from other teachers frustrated me to no end. Why couldn't they explain it if they learnt how to do it?

Then one day early on in my second year of teaching I had an experience which was quite confronting. An experienced colleague of mine and I were talking and she was complaining good-naturedly of having a student teacher. She commented,

That means that I will have to get organised! Clean up my lesson plans, I know what I'm doing but it's all up here (taps her head!) and I can't really explain it to her [the student teacher]

I thought about this and realised that if I were to have a student teacher I would actually be in a similar position. It really is all in my head! I keep notes on my classes' progress and tasks but as for all the little nuances of the students and the ways in which I've learnt to manage a class, I would find it quite hard to explain to someone else. Why is this knowledge so difficult to pass on? Possibly due to the personal and subjective nature of how each teacher manages and teaches their class. Perhaps teaching is so impossibly context-based that there is no truly useful advice on how to deal with a given situation.

This realisation of a wealth of knowledge that is difficult to account for, is clearly a significant moment in the development of mine and the other beginning teachers' identities. At this point the concept of an “identity” as a teacher requires some clarification. There is much written about this process and how identities are socially constructed (Gee, 1994). Identity within the context of the beginning teachers' world I see as a product of the situation in which you find yourself. I do not want to put the concept of one's identity on a pedestal or present identity as a “thing” that we all eventually attain. I perceive identity to mean one's constructed selves, that is, a beginning teacher's identity is constructed from the varied experiences they have as they are learning how to teach and how they position themselves in relation to the profession. Identity can be seen as a work in progress, one that is continually being modified and improved upon according to how you see yourself and what you are capable of achieving. These experiences begin to form a bank of professional knowledge, begin to form a professional identity as distinct from a bunch of disjointed, episodic snatches of experience. This is not a linear process; the formation of a beginning teachers' professional identity is a journey that goes round in circles, backwards and forwards. As Lave and Wenger (1991) observe,

[Identity] It is not merely a static process; it is a dynamic, generative process (p. 24).

(Lave and Wenger, 1991)

To see it as a linear model would be to deny any experimentation, mistakes and triumphs as these do not follow any strict pattern.

An incident that had a great impact on my burgeoning sense of professional identity occurred halfway through my first year at Mountain H.S. I attended an in-service about a film to see if it would be appropriate for Year 7 or 8. After this I reported back to the English Faculty at one of our regular meetings. The other staff listened to what I had to say and responded with comments and affirmations about the value of the film.

The simple act of these staff members listening and responding to me as “one of them” – as a “real” teacher – was extremely important for my development as a professional within the school. “Vera”, the coordinator, then asked me to put together a teaching resources pack for the English teachers. This was further reinforcement that I was valued and respected as a teacher, albeit an inexperienced one.

My own professional identity construction was influenced by these episodes. I feel as though I am a burgeoning professional. At times I don't feel professional at all; most other times I am confident in my abilities. The professional community in which I am in I find very supportive and it has helped shape my own identity as an English teacher. The conversations with the first-year English teachers at my school changed this perception of a stable and cohesive English faculty and forced me to re-evaluate my own identity within it. The discussion held a mirror up to my own professional progress and place within the school community. The following conversation was very productive both for the beginning teachers, myself and the wider audience of teachers.

### **THE CONVERSATIONS: WHAT AM I DOING AND WHERE'S THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN ALL OF THIS?**

To give the conversations a context, I had asked at morning briefing if I could meet with all first-year English teachers at lunchtime. I thought that it would be very beneficial for the first-year teachers to get together and have a casual chat about their progress. The one group meeting at the start of the year with an assistant principal while well-meaning, seems woefully inadequate. This could also be an opportunity for us to talk about our experiences and in the process, jointly construct our professional knowledge. I thought a meeting such as this would be useful for the beginning teachers for two main reasons: to allow them a time to feel free to share experiences among their peers with no other teachers around and also to talk to myself who is two years further along the path. This is important for beginning teachers, as it gives them a sense of belonging to a group of teachers as one with insider knowledge, rather than being on the outer of a group of experienced teachers with a huge collective bank of knowledge which the beginning teachers have no part of yet.

Being conscious that lunchtimes are precious, especially for a first-year teacher, I assured them that it would not take all lunchtime. There were seven teachers who turned up, Ken, Sam, Jan, Mandy, Kim, Dianna and Anne (pseudonyms).

These teachers are all very passionate about English; all very different characters. Anne comes across as being the most serious about the teaching of English. She is quite distressed about her perceived lack of success in conveying her love of English to her students. She is the most openly reflective of the group and very honest about her feelings of inadequacy and frustration. Kim, Mandy and Jan are all very vocal about their views and experiences at Mountain H.S thus far. They see the school as generally a good place to work, they like the staff and think that the students are, on the whole, well behaved. Ken, Sam and Dianna were the quietest of the group. They listened intently throughout the session though and did contribute occasionally. They looked weary and dispirited; however, they came to the discussion, which they didn't have to do. This suggested they wanted some affirmation and encouragement. The other group members were very enthusiastic and tended to control the discussion. I let this happen. I wanted a casual discussion and saw no point in forcing them to contribute. It would have defeated the point of letting them just speak, or not, if they so chose.

During the discussion it was interesting to see how the more vocal of the group finished each others' sentences and knew exactly what the other was talking about. Their conversations were context specific and would make little sense to an outsider. They are situated within a specific context and learning community (Lave and Wegner, 1991), and their comments resonate with other beginning teachers I have interviewed. The language they have developed is understood by all, even such phrases as, "I had a crap class" are to be understood within a very specific context. I asked what "crap" meant exactly in this context. Kim replied,

I reckon it just means that your class has not worked and you really tried to make it work, not like you just went in there and didn't have anything planned – you really tried and it was just, crap!

This met with affirming nods and comments. Discussions between these teachers have produced a language which is understood by all and which they have imbued with subtly different meanings for specific words. This difference is infused with their desire to have a productive class. The language used by the beginning teachers may differ from an experienced teacher who believes that they have this dimension of their practice under control.

We began talking about what they had found difficult thus far as a beginning English teacher. It took time for them to answer, Kim said,

One word: overwhelming! Prep, admin stuff and correction, I don't have time to teach!

There was a collective chorus of agreement about this comment. The general feeling was one of no time and too much to do which could be seen as a comment for starting almost any job. The discussion about teaching rounds indicated they felt much more confident on rounds as you know exactly what you needed and only taught two or three periods a day so had more time to prepare. The rounds were still a point of reference for the teachers, which makes sense as it is their only teaching experience thus far. Some felt flustered about this lack of time and organization. Jane commented,

..done all this photocopying and I forgot to bring it, OK, plan B!

There is a sense that Jane worked out what to do in this situation and was not completely lost as she comments. I felt that she was being overly critical of herself and did not give herself enough credit for being able to be flexible in her approach to class preparation. Others felt they impinged too much on other teachers' time with their questions,

I hate hassling people too much, they are so busy just like me (Anne)

This comment reminded me of Olson and Osbourne's (1991) study in which novice teachers felt that they were often in the way of their more experienced colleagues. Anne is a very perceptive and sensitive person so her comment reflects this over-developed sense of awareness of what other people are thinking. Sometimes it would seem that Anne needs to push for what she needs rather than be afraid of what people are thinking.

I don't want to step on anyone's toes. I don't want them to think I'm too pushy, I don't want them to think I'm too much of a coward. (Anne)

There was a general agreement about this point. The comment reflects the insider/outsider perspective; the teachers still feel as though they are outsiders to a degree. They do not feel sufficiently inducted into the profession that their needs are as important as their more experienced colleagues. Mandy commented:

I hassle different people. If I feel like I am bothering someone, I move on!

This is a creative approach by Mandy. However, it is one that still suggests tentativeness when it comes to making her needs known. The other teachers tended to agree with this line of thought. The group as a whole was very cohesive. The collective voices and thoughts of first-year teachers, all with their own opinions but also eager to agree with the thoughts of others, were heard. Bakhtin's notion of ventriloquism comes to the fore here. The speaker of the words does not necessarily own their words until they are reinforced and repeated by others within the same social language as seen in this group of teachers.

The word in language is half someone else's. It is "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention...prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that a speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 21).

Discussion about the English course outline took up a major part of the conversation. This was an interesting departure from other interviews I had conducted where curriculum issues such as this never arose. One comment that encapsulated the group's thoughts came from Mandy in response to a student telling her that English was their favourite subject:

Your subject is my favourite subject but I don't know what it's about yet!

There was much laughter at this comment and a chorus of agreement. The discussion

then moved onto the vague nature of the English course. Anne commented,

They say: here's the outline for the subject, but do it however you want. They need to give you the work, be more specific, maybe week by week and then you can figure out what to do.

Anne felt cut off from English as a subject she valued by these vague instructions. The teachers talked about the general nature of the course and the collective feeling was one of helplessness and disorganisation. They felt that they had plenty of content knowledge but no "hooks" to hang it on. They are more confident in their content knowledge (Schulman, 1986, 1987) than they are with putting that knowledge into effective practice. Anne's comment voiced this doubt,

It's feeling like you are treading water and it's too vague, it's very hard, there's no right or wrong answer and we need to meet regularly and discuss assessment.

Mandy talked about the time wasted by this perceived lack of direction,

It means that everyone is writing their own program, what a waste of time! If I wasn't proactive and chased people I wouldn't get anywhere!

The struggle for identity within what appears to them to be a chaotic curriculum was paramount to these teachers. They felt as though they were not really teaching English to the best of their abilities because they had no outcome to work towards. They did not have the sufficient experience to be able to know where their students should be at. They needed to be told, they needed a starting point. Anne said,

I am not at the level where I can be looking at outcomes and go – I am there – I don't have time to read the small print.

The "small print" mentioned was the Curriculum Standards Framework II. The others knew what Anne meant by this; they were having a similar problem. The language used by the teachers was understood by all, as it is part of their community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The issues that these teachers are grappling with suggest that they have little sense of ownership over their teaching yet. They feel that the curriculum is a document which they had no part in writing or constructing and therefore they have no sense of where it fits in and how it should work. Therefore the process of constructing their professional identity is stifled somewhat as they are finding it difficult to move forward.

The English curriculum in this case is seen as a concrete and important document by these teachers. It is not an amorphous, background entity that is sometimes referred to. They want it to help guide their pedagogy in their lessons and to give them a sense of where they fit in the larger picture, rather than going from lesson to lesson. Structure and a grounded curricular framework are missing from these teachers' experiences and I would suggest that this is of concern.

Throughout this conversation, even though many negative comments and observations were made, the teachers felt that their situation would improve.

I can't wait for second year! I will know what to do and it will be like a duck to

water! (Kim)

Kim's confidence in the positive transition into second year repeats the earlier comments about teachers' knowledge being a tacit acquisition. She did not know how to explain why she thought this to be the case and said,

It's just going to be better – I will know stuff.

“Stuff” is a very loose definition and one that encapsulates an almost infinite number of elements. The other teachers nodded and agreed with Kim's comment about “stuff”. The common language and experiences created an understanding of what second year was going to be. This is an idealised view of second year. I and my peers certainly have not had a trouble-free experience in second year. The one most important thing that I have learnt is that teaching is a constant learning curve.

Anne, the most reflective of the group, also noted that the only time she really reflected about her practice was when something went wrong.

The only time I reflect on my teaching is when something goes wrong. So I'm not noticing anything that is going right. I feel bad that I'm not questioning that what I'm doing is right.

Her identity is constructed out of incidents where she feels she has failed. Having nowhere to place herself within the larger picture of the English course, Anne's failures seem more significant as she cannot see these as a smaller part of her journey to a larger goal. She seems aware of this but is too tired to do anything about it.

I asked if this feeling was true for all the subjects they taught or was it specific to English. The answer was that it was there for other subjects but it felt more pronounced in English,

I feel that I'm not being true to what English is. Initially I thought I was but it's gone. I'm ignoring all the good stuff and I think that it's wrong. I'm passionate about English and I think as a teacher you need to be passionate or at least pretend! (Sam)

This comment would suggest that Anne is not bringing together her content knowledge and pedagogic knowledge because of her difficulties with the curriculum (Schulman, 1986). Schulman suggests three ways of relating content knowledge and pedagogic knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. I would argue that Anne has a well-developed content knowledge and has ideas about how to express this to teach her class (pedagogic knowledge) but is struggling with her curricular knowledge. Therefore, she is missing a vital link if she is to make sense of her progress as a teacher, since she is unable to see herself in the wider context of the English curriculum.

To cope with this problem, the teachers sometimes admitted that they pretended that everything was going well. Anne talks about attending a VATE conference and talking to a colleague she went to university with.

I felt that I was towing the party line: “everything is fine, no problems, couldn't be happier. I'm just waiting for something bad to happen!” but everything is not fine,



everything is hard and I'm not being true to myself.

The perception of the unstructured nature of the course at this school and the subsequent feelings of disorganisation experienced by these teachers is obviously impacting on the construction of a professional identity. The lack of discussion about classroom management, relationships with peers, dealing with differing student abilities, literacy levels and the other commonly perceived problem of the first-year English teacher suggest that these teachers' feelings of a lack of direction is more of a problem. It seems to be hindering the professional growth of these teachers and not allowing them to develop as the teachers that they want to become. The teachers' frustration indicates a longing to overcome this problem and to be able to re-conceptualise their place within the school as a teacher who knows the direction they should be heading.

When asked about what they consider to be a professional teacher they were all very clear and direct about what this meant. They know what they want to achieve; it is continuing to build on these ideals that is proving to be difficult.

- I need to be less lazy
- Be mature
- Be a good role model
- Be consistent across the board, which we can't do because there is no consultation or collaboration!
- Be passionate
- Make a difference
- Have an adequate distance between you and the kids
- They [the students] need to be able to rely and trust you to be consistent in your treatment of them
- They have to see you as a professional, as a doctor or lawyer!

This reference to doctors and lawyers is interesting as the teachers' perceptions of themselves as professionals appear to be framed by these "elitist" occupations. I asked Kim why she used this comparison. She replied that she was thinking of other important occupations to compare teaching with. Goodson and Walker (1991) discuss models of professionalism that are reflected in this conversation.

...in order for teachers to realize their individually defined personal/professional potential, teaching and development needs to be defined interpreted and facilitated within a broader institutional context (p. 56).

Mountain H.S., specifically the English Faculty, is not making any concerted effort to facilitate a sense of professionalism within this group of teachers. Therefore, comparisons with other "important" professions are made to put their identities into a context the teachers can relate to.

The other teachers agreed with this comparison and added vehemently that being a teacher was even more important than these professions but not bestowed with nearly as much status in society. Their frustration lies with the journey to build on this professionalism being hampered by a vague and disorganised curriculum. When asked if they felt they were achieving a degree of professionalism, they agreed that

they tried but it was difficult. Mandy said,

My kids say: why on earth would you want to be a teacher? They treat me as if I am a real loser!

Taken in context, when she said this Mandy was laughing and she said it didn't really bother her, it was just funny. The others thought that this type of comment was helpful because it made them more determined to try to succeed as a teacher. However, it does devalue the teaching of English and no matter how determined you are to teach well, this type of comment does have an impact. I know in my own classes the most devastating comment I have ever heard was, "Miss, this is boring". I felt upset and inadequate: I am a boring teacher, I thought to myself? It did make me determined to never ever be "boring" again, though, no matter how subjective that view may have been! Not before it shook my confidence though.

These issues experienced by the teachers in this conversation are not intended to be a fixed framework of labels for problems, rather a starting point to look at areas which impact upon the development of beginning teachers' professional identity. As the literature suggests (Veenman, 1994) I am not arguing that these issues are problems only for beginning teachers. Rather that these issues directly contribute to the construction of beginning teachers' professional identity and therefore need to be investigated.

The main issue that arose from this conversation was the status of the beginning teachers' subject knowledge and the impact that this had on their sense of professionalism. It seemed to be challenged and reduced by the community where they find themselves and the curriculum they are obliged to follow blindly. At the risk of putting words in the teachers' mouths, the old adage "you have to know the rules before you break them" seems to apply in this case. They need to have access to a detailed and thorough description of the curriculum before they can mould it to their own particular teaching styles and philosophies.

The discussion was a very cohesive one. The teachers all intimated that they were having the same problems. Their own small, professional learning community felt isolated from the wider community of the English Faculty and this was a problem. They had no sense of continuity and structure in which to position themselves. The development of their professional identities needed to be nurtured by the school to a greater extent.

Not wanting to leave the conversation on such a negative note, I asked if they saw the situation improving. They all emphatically agreed that it would,

Vera is such an ace coordinator, she is a really nice person, she means well but she's so vague sometimes. I love her though! It [my teaching] has to improve with time and practice (Sam).

The conversation ended here having taken just over an entire lunchtime. The teachers commented that we should do it again, that it was good to know that they weren't alone in their thoughts and feelings. Anne commented,

Can we do this again sometime? It was really good to get that all out.

I was pleased the teachers felt the discussion was so beneficial. However, it did not go at all the way I had foreseen. My preconceptions about the English Faculty did frame my discussion to begin with, as a point of reference. By the conclusion of the discussion I felt as though we were talking about a different school entirely.

These conversations are to be continued throughout the year and answers to many of the issues and questions raised will be investigated. This is the start of a journey with these teachers that will produce some useful insights into the factors that influence beginning English teachers' identity construction, the language they use to speak about it and the breakdown of my own perceptions about the Faculty. The impact that the professional community has upon these teachers' identity construction is profound. It is summed up well by Dianna:

I hate to ask – everyone else seems to know what they're doing and where they're going. Maybe it's just me!

It is clear that there is a long road ahead for these teachers and the English Faculty. It is one that is not unusual, however. The wider community of beginning teachers would relate to many of these experiences. It is the value and importance that we place on such discussions that must not be overlooked.

(All names of people and places have been changed to protect confidentiality).

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