

## **Editorial: Textual diversity in changing times**

JOANNE O'MARA  
*Deakin University*

LINDA LAIDLAW  
*University of Alberta*

The papers from this issue were first presented at the International Federation of English Teachers (IFTE) Conference, held in Melbourne from 5-8 July, 2003. The conference attracted delegates from around the English-speaking world. The programme was organised around five themed strands – each theme developed from suggestions submitted by member organisations. The papers in this issue represent the scope of papers presented in the “Literacy and Textual Diversity: English as Cultural Studies” strand of the conference. This strand, convened by Catherine Beavis, Jo O'Mara and Bill Green, had a series of papers presented around working sessions.

The brief for our strand was to consider challenges to the English and Literacy curriculum in current times. These challenges come, in part, from changing views of text and reading, reflected in the incorporation of a much wider range of visual and non-print texts and literacies, by technology and popular culture, and a shift from print to digital literacies. Further, the role of literature in promoting civic and national cultural identities has been thrown into question in a climate where schools and society are composed of people with multiple cultural and ethnic histories and identities, and where the politics of texts in challenging or maintaining the status quo has been recognized.

In such a context, what place do texts have in the English and literacy curriculum? What kinds of texts and literacies should be the focus of study? How do the arts, and aesthetic, practical and performance approaches contribute to the production of the student citizen? What polarities might/should exist between high and popular culture? Where kids are reading different texts, and reading differently, how can/should we bring these out-of-school literacies and knowledge back into schools? To speak of English as cultural studies is one way of signalling new understandings of what English teaching is, and what it might do and be differently. As you read through the papers in this issue, we ask you to consider what English (or English Language Arts, in North American contexts) has been, as well as what it might become, and to reflect on the place and relationship of what have traditionally been conceived as core components, as well as new aspects and dimensions of culture, textuality and schooling.

Each strand was asked to prepare a list of ten summary statements of the strand's work for presentation at the final plenary session. The following statements from the “Literacy and Textual Diversity: English as Cultural Studies” strand were compiled and edited by Dennis Sumara, but represent different threads of discussion:

1. Literacy is understood as a socially situated practice. This conceptual frame suggests that less emphasis be given to the components of literacy practices

- and more be given to the complex relationships among language, culture, and teaching.
2. A cultural studies approach to English teaching *emphasizes* the relationship between literacy/literary practices and the ongoing production of human individual and collective identities. What is produced in the English classroom includes new experiences of identities that co-emerge with what is studied (including the identities of the teachers). This suggests that theories of learning that continue to emphasize the individual as the locus of cognition must be reconsidered and replaced with theories of learning that emphasise the co-emergence of individual and collective learning.
  3. More attention must be given to technologies of practices. Using the Foucaultian understanding of “technologies” as those social and cultural forms and practices that function to organize the production of knowledge (including knowledge about and performances of self and collective identities), a cultural studies approach to English teaching suggests that we continue to interrogate how our very practices of reading/writing/interpreting/representing/teaching condition, constrain, and enlarge what can be known (and who can know).
  4. Teaching and learning are no longer considered to be only methods by which existing knowledge is transmitted and reproduced; rather, it is understood as a way of interrupting commonsense – as a way of making interventions. The teaching and learning of subject matters are understood as explicit ways of “changing the subject” – where subject is understood broadly – as both product and producer.
  5. Literacies and aesthetic productions are seen as social, cultural, and political acts (no longer merely innocent representations and/or interpretations of these).
  6. A cultural studies approach to English teaching situates the teacher as researcher/ethnographer. In addition to the usual questions of curriculum and pedagogy (what is to be taught? how is it to be taught?), the teacher also remains interested in questions related to the purposes of schooling, the conditions of learning that limit and expand possibilities, and so on. While these were considered by our group to be crucial features of English teaching as Cultural Studies, there were concerns expressed about how teachers might learn to do this work (in teacher education?) and how teachers might find the material conditions to support this extra layer of work.
  7. A cultural studies approach to English teaching expands notions of what counts as a literary object and a literary experience. Following work in post-structural and post-colonial theories and, as well, theories and practices of deconstructive reading and interpreting, the question of how literary experiences are defined and developed within the context of English teaching must continue to be explored – particularly in light of the “identity work” that is now seen to be primary to the work of subject English in schools.
  8. A cultural studies approach to teaching suggests the need to invent new ways to use language to describe subject English. Is it possible to continue to use the

term “English” as an umbrella term to capture the complexities of recent approaches to the study of language, culture, and identity?

9. A cultural studies approach to subject English emphasizes the importance of the teachers’ deep knowledge of the disciplines/genres/practices that are particular to the field. The challenge for teacher education and for ongoing teacher development is to use the existing and emergent knowledge base in the field of cultural studies to support the specific challenges of English teaching.
10. A cultural studies approach to English teaching requires that the theories of learning that currently structure schooling practices be subject to a thorough and informed critique. Although teacher education has been informed by new theoretical insights (particularly from the constructivists and social constructionists), where new teachers become competent at applying progressive methods (for example, literature circles, writer’s workshop), the programmes do not support students’ developing an informed and disciplined relationship with dramatic/poetic/prosaic forms, including those that are organized and shaped by new media and computer technologies.

Dennis summarised the work as follows:

In sum, our group felt that a cultural studies approach to English teaching suggested that the teacher of English is one who is knowledgeable about the historical and cultural emergence of the subject English and who understands both the possibilities and the constraints of that historical trajectory. The teacher of English is knowledgeable about social, cultural, political, and learning theories that support critical literacies and pedagogies. As well, the English teacher is expert in some of the forms and structures that have and that might constitute this field.

In the papers that follow, we present three of the strand keynotes (Burn, Sumara and Nixon) and a range of papers representing some of the strand’s concerns. It should be noted that a number of drama workshops were offered as part of this strand, and that drama was an important aspect of textual diversity that was considered. We hope that you find the papers useful, and that reading them as a collection gives you a sense of the rich “textual diversity” and energy of the IFTE conference.

Andrew Burn, in his article “Poets, skaters and avatars—performance, identity and new media”, begins by outlining three challenges posed by new media and the developing pedagogies associated with them: firstly, to be tugged away from the mode of language as the supreme and defining communicative form; secondly, to embrace a different idea of how texts are in the world; thirdly, to move away from the idea of signification as an abstract practice. He examines four examples of work which, in one way or another, represent aspects of media education, but are always closely related to English. Related video clips are available for you to view in the html version of the article.

In “Toward a theory of embodied literary experience”, Dennis Sumara offers an expanded understanding of what counts as literary — “one that includes, but is not limited to, engagements with what are considered to be works of literature”. He describes a theory of embodied literary experience that might help teachers and researchers of language and literacy to better understand both the structure of

imaginative engagements and how these participate in the ongoing development of the human mind and sense of personal identity.

In her paper, "Textual diversity: Who needs it?", Helen Nixon explores the textual diversity of children's writing. In discussing the diverse nature of children's cultural worlds she notes:

What is particularly interesting – and this perhaps goes against the grain for many English/literacy teachers – is that children rarely see a dichotomy between print and media texts. Rather, children move seamlessly from one mode to another in their quest for meaning-making (cf. Robinson, 1997), as they establish their social identities and social relations with others.

Through the use of a case study, she illustrates the "rich semiotic world of children, in which texts of many kinds are conceptually linked".

In "New ways and different paths for the M<sup>2</sup> Generation of university students", Claire Woods focuses on the journey taken by students in a university Arts programme; a programme with the title BA (Professional and Creative Communication), in which the focus is on writing, reading and text studies, and where the first emphasis is on the production of texts – the writing or making of text, rather than a traditional "literature"-based curriculum. She focuses on the work and response of one student as she completes the first course in a three-year Arts degree and on her continued reflection on the impact of her studies as she enters the workforce.

Julie Faulkner examines the uses of popular culture texts in her article, "Like you have a bubble inside of you that just wants to pop": Popular culture, pleasure and the English classroom". She notes that much of the work she has done in relation to popular culture "has been a systematic attempt to rebuild many of the assumptions of my own English trajectory". Citing a profound classroom moment when a student made a powerful connection between the novel they were studying and a contemporary film, her paper explores both the theoretical foundations and the classroom uses of popular culture texts.

Alyson Simpson, in "Language as popular deictic: Reading "Not Happy Jan!" as the evidence of shifting cultural contexts", discusses a form of critical discourse analysis that makes possible critical readings of texts of popular culture as contextualised within a particular community. The discussion examines a social dimension of language use where current cultural artefacts such as advertisements, television shows and popular personalities become the reference point for new linguistic expressions such as, *Not Happy Jan!* These sayings become part of everyday communication in conversation, emails and chat rooms; however, their semiotic value is heavily weighted both by their continuing relevance and their popularity

Jacqueline Manuel and Dennis Robinson's, "Teenage boys, teenage girls, and books: Re-viewing some assumptions about gender and adolescents' reading practices" report on the findings of a pilot project and the interim findings of a large-scale project currently underway, investigating Australian adolescents' reading choices. The findings of this study contribute to existing research that stresses the need for English

teachers to consider the role of gender as *one of a number* of factors, rather than as the *only* factor influencing teenagers' achievements in and attitudes towards reading.

In "Creative nonfiction in the classroom: Extending the boundaries of literary stud", Paul Skrebels discusses the significance and uses of creative non-fiction. He argues that "the inclusion of creative non-fiction both as an object of enquiry and as a topos for written practice in an English syllabus is of value in opening up "literature" in ways more in keeping with current thinking about the field, and not least because it re-validates "personal writing" – usually compartmentalised as "composition" – as a legitimate aspect of literary endeavour."

In the first of two teacher narratives, "Modern Gothic narratives: A revolution of romantic proportions", Melpomene Dixon discusses a unit of work developed for senior English students where students were challenged to draw connections between traditional Gothic texts and popular Gothic visual and written texts, using Romanticism as a springboard, through a series of carefully orchestrated exercises and tasks. The range of texts students read and discussed included *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Shining*, *Bladerunner*, *The Lost Boys*, newspaper articles, poetry and philosophy.

In the second teacher narrative, Douglas McClenaghan explores the work of a Year Nine student, Sue, in his article, "Writing poetry – and beyond". Sue's poem was confronting to her peer audience. McClenaghan writes that it is also confronting to another audience, English teachers. "English curriculum continues to be dominated by circumscribed notions of what is legitimate, what counts as competence, knowledge, culture, and to privilege essay text literacy (even when dealing with non-print texts)." He points out that texts like Sue's are subversive of all this, and by implication of the power and control invested in the teacher's position as expert. He calls for classroom contexts to be created "where students' out of school cultures can be understood and used, but not appropriated, for meaningful purposes".

We expect that you will find these papers both interesting and challenging. We believe that the collection as a whole gives a sense of the multiple texts and textual approaches that were presented in the Textual Diversity strand of IFTE (2003).