

## Reframing beginning English teachers as knowledge producers: Learning to teach and transgress

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*ABSTRACT: As first-year, graduate English teachers we draw upon our own experiences and conversations to examine issues of professional learning and identity for beginning teachers. This paper looks at the different ways we as beginning teachers are positioned by dominant discourses as we enter schools from university and the ways these can shape and limit teaching and learning practices. We consider the ways in which these might be resisted and productively used through the establishment of discursive spaces and collaborative work.*

*KEYWORDS: Beginning teachers, collaboration, English teaching, narrative inquiry, professional learning, self-study.*

### INTRODUCTION

**Email from: Katrina Mathews**  
**To: Scott Bulfin**  
**Date: Sat, 16 Aug 2003 14:25:32 +1000**  
**Subject: and so I am left wondering**

I was sitting with my "student parliament" students after school yesterday and we were talking about English, etc. and Jo (yr. 9 girl **not** in my class) says, "Oh, I've heard all about your English class Ms."

**Ms Mathews:** Really Jo - and?

**Jo:** Oh ... nothing

**Jack (friend of girl in my class):** Yeah, Sam says you never do anything and it's really easy.

**Ms Mathews:** Really?

**Jack:** Yep. Not like my teacher who always gives us so much work. As soon as we finish something off we have a whole lot of new work to do and we never get a break, all we do is write and be quiet.

**Jo:** Yeah, they're mean.

**Ms. Mathews:** Hmm ... so, they don't think they get enough work?

**Luke (from my class):** Yeah, but we do more like discussin' and different stuff.

**Ms. Mathews:** Right. So we talk a lot and don't actually do anything.

**Jo:** Yeah, but your class sounds fun.

I love talking to kids in these different kinds of environments, but I am left wondering. Do my students actually do anything at all and why aren't I giving them more essays? Are they going to get into year ten and be at a disadvantage? Do I place too much emphasis on the wrong kind of thing because, in the end, when it all boils down, they need to be able to write good essays to get good marks? Are these skills at all translatable or, come the end of year exam will my students simply not be able to do it at all? I know others really model the VCE program and the kinds of writing and activities that they do and I'm worried about these kids.

**Email from: Scott Bulfin**  
**To: Katrina Mathews**  
**Date: Sat, 16 Aug 2003 22:22:07 +1000**  
**Subject: and so I am left wondering**

This is sooo funny - do you remember me telling you a similar story earlier in the year? "Mr Bulfin, this class is a bludge, we don't do anything" - That really threw me for a while - I was like, what am I doing wrong? Am I doing too many "soft" activities? Not enough "real work"? Oh and I must mention that my yr9s - the ones I now share - are doing heaps of work for their other teacher - filling their books in fact - but they've only written a couple of pages of scribbles for me!? Perhaps we're wrong but who knows, it seems like my y11s are doing OK - although this could be just what is left of their skills from last year - what I haven't yet destroyed.

In the above email exchange there is a strong sense, at least from a number of the students' perspectives, of what constitutes worthwhile "work" in an English classroom. It is interesting how quickly we, as beginning teachers, seem to doubt the understandings we have developed about the importance of particular types of textual practices in the lives of our students. Perhaps our students are concerned they will not be prepared for the real intellectual rigours of the senior school VCE<sup>1</sup> curriculum? Perhaps they are speaking a particular learning discourse that suggests "real" learning comes from doing "busy work", or that there is nothing substantial to be gained from textual exploration, imagination and collaboration? We're not really sure, but it seems to frame a beginning for this paper that helps to speak to our concerns about learning and how it is conceptualised. It also touches on issues of professional learning for English teachers and the kinds of implications these conceptions might have for seeing teachers as valuable producers of knowledge about teaching and learning. As early career English teachers and writers who have been meeting regularly during this year in a type of collaborative learning relationship, and as good friends, we want to engage in these issues as beginning English teachers *and* researchers – a perspective seldom heard in its own right.

When looking over past conversations and reflections it is tempting to smooth over the story, to rework the piece – to reposition ourselves within the tale so that we appear knowledgeable, or to have reached a point of closure or resolution (cf. Swidler, 2001). Our email conversation, however, invokes the sense of doubt that we feel about our teaching practice, and alludes to a number of important questions: What is productive or meaningful learning? How does it occur and how do we promote it as we "feel our way through" our work? How do we hold onto what we believe is valuable learning when other established and powerful "messages" and "stories" about learning ring out loudly? While it may be more flattering for us to iron out inconsistencies and to create a "definitive" picture, we are wary of doing so. Our knowledge, struggles and growth would not be adequately represented, nor would we be able to capture the sense of uncertainty and "provisionality" that pervades our teaching.

The problems we muse over in the above conversation are equally as true for our own learning as early career teachers as they are for our students. We believe it is easy to forget that teachers are learners and should in fact understand "learning" better than most – after all, it is our business. Do we sometimes subconsciously assume that learning is only for students? For children? For beginners? For the "other" person? Perhaps while knowing a lot about "learning" and what can help it along, we forget to hold ourselves up to the mirror and ask the same questions. In the following discussion we would like to explore these questions and others. How do *we* best learn about teaching? How can *we* develop our practice and knowledge in ways that are meaningful both on a personal level, while satisfying the demands and expectations

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<sup>1</sup> Victorian Certificate of Education

of various teaching and regulatory bodies? How might *we*, as beginners, create a physical and metaphorical “discursive space” in a meaningful way when our work and teaching conditions often appear pre-determined, inflexible and isolating?

In framing such questions and in desiring to speak partly from our own experiences as learners and teachers, we are signalling that the following account should be read as a kind of self-study of (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Loughran & Northfield, 1996) and narrative inquiry into (Witherell & Noddings, 1991) of our attempts to learn about teaching. During the past year, our first as teachers, we have undertaken a collaborative and dialogic approach to our own professional learning. We have not always understood and framed our experiences in this way, but as we have actively listened, talked, read, written and theorised our experiences, we have come to know and see them differently and more powerfully (cf. Ritchie & Wilson, 2000).

For us, then, questions about professional learning are closely tied to issues of professional identity and how we see and understand ourselves as teachers. Of course, learning to be a teacher is not just a matter of acquiring a collection or repertoire of skills and procedures. It involves more than “doing what a teacher does”. It also involves talking and speaking like a teacher, acting like a teacher, “thinking, feeling, believing and valuing in ways that are recognised as characteristic of teachers” (Doecke, 2003, p. 297; cf. Gee, 1991). The ways we have engaged in professional learning continues to have important implications for our developing professional identities as early career teachers and legitimate knowledge producers.

In this collection of thoughts we want to reflect on those experiences that brought us to our present position, however provisional this position might be, and to attempt some kind of discussion gesturing towards larger issues for the professional learning of beginning teachers. While we realise the precarious position we are putting ourselves in – we don't claim to speak for all beginning teachers – we are also aware of the scarcity of writing from beginning and early career teachers themselves. We want to contribute to the discussion about how these public and professional issues impact on the personal and private domains of teaching (cf. Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Doecke, 2001).

### **SCHOOLS AS “DISCURSIVE SPACES” - FOR ANYONE BUT US**

There are many stories, or narratives, about the beginning teacher's “journey” – usually from “inexperience” to “wisdom” – which we want to argue are problematic. During a pre-service teaching placement, a supervisor suggested to Katrina,

It doesn't matter what a textbook says, or how many theories you know or what you understand about stages of development or Piaget or the rest, it's not going to tell you about what you are doing in the classroom and what it is to actually teach (Katrina Mathews, Personal Journal, Sept, 2002).

Similar sentiments have been expressed in many conversations, comments and writings we have been privy to in the last five years. These “stories” and “narratives” are often embedded in the established discourses of schools, universities, governments and community. They are not limited to the “struggle” of the beginning teacher and can be seen in many fields of endeavour – often as the “proving oneself” narrative.

These established discourses (or ways of thinking) often work to position beginning teachers in ways that ignore and often debase the rich learning and experiences they bring to the profession, both from their teacher education and from their own life experiences. When beginning teachers are framed this way it is often difficult for us to conceive of ourselves as valuable producers of knowledge about teaching and learning. Instead, it is easy to accept and acquiesce to the expectations of others. The problem is that beginners often feel unable to comment on the situation, whatever it may be, not because of inexperience (although they may feel they have nothing important to contribute) but often because of the ways beginning teachers are positioned or set up by particular discourses. This situation tends towards a “consumption” type metaphor where novices become “sponges” and “soak up” valuable knowledge from experienced others. It seems to us that this situation can work to undermine and erode teacher professionalism. We prefer to look at the situation differently.

By invoking the concepts of discourse and narrative we want to understand schools as physical and metaphorical spaces. Physical spaces like classrooms, staffrooms and courtyards play an important part in regulating the relationships between those who inhabit these spaces. Metaphorical elements, such as discursive practices and policy effects, are equally important as schools are places where many different ways of speaking, knowing, valuing, and so on, are brought together – sometimes in harmony, and often in discord. More established processes or powerful discourses “control” most of the “ground” in schools, making it difficult for lesser known voices and/or practices to be heard.

We are reminded by our own experiences as student teachers of the difficulties that we faced as “outsiders” to particular school cultures and established ways of doing things, even when we felt like “professionals” who were trying to learn. Anyone who has started a new job recently will most likely have similar stories to tell. Invariably, as beginning teachers enter new discourse environments, there is some tension. Established processes and discourses are not “taken on” or adopted uncritically and can cause a sense of unease or discontinuity. Yet challenging established “ways of knowing and doing” is extremely confronting. As an “outsider”, a beginner, even as a “legitimate peripheral participant” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) it is hugely difficult to conceive how a school environment could be different. Pre-existing ideas and knowledge can come under question. Applying existing knowledge and ideas, or even thinking and speaking in ways that are at odds with a new environment or established culture is difficult – to say nothing of engaging in any kind of critique or change initiative.

We believe that part of the problem lies in the fact that teacher learning is generally conceptualised as an individual and psychological process only. In fact, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that teachers learn and construct knowledge through dialogic means – through “authentic conversation” (Clark, 2001) or “teacher talk” (Doecke, Brown, & Loughran, 2000; Florio-Ruane, 1991; Rust, 1999; Rust & Orland, 2001). We want to look at our own experiences in this light and begin to wonder about how to create the kinds of discursive spaces that allow this kind of learning to occur. There is plenty of talk that goes on inside schools, but there are also many barriers that do not encourage the kind of sustained intellectual conversations we believe are important for the professional development of teachers. These types of

collaboration amongst teachers can lead to productive research into and solutions for local issues and problems, as well as a means of teacher learning and school renewal.

However, opening up spaces for this kind of learning and work is difficult due to the many varieties of “dominant” discourse that are played out in schools on a daily basis. Of particular note is a kind of managerial discourse, where students, parents and communities become “clients”, and teachers and schools, “providers” or “training organisations”. Outcomes ideology, performance-based standards and achievement tests are the various instruments of such discourses, all of which tend to ignore the powerful learning opportunities possible when teachers are positioned as knowledge producers – professionals who are able to construct valuable knowledge with one another in collaborative spaces.

### **GETTIN’ REAL WHILE THE GETTIN’ S GOOD**

In this section we want to look at how our experiences in pre-service education and in first-year teaching helped us begin to conceptualise our continued professional growth and learning as a collaborative and dialogic process.

When exploring the disjunctions between university and school, popular discourse tends to highlight the difficulties that early-career teachers often experience. These deficit explanations often focus on what is lacking from pre-service education – “more practical skills”, “more realistic classroom management strategies”, or an understanding of school management procedures. Interestingly, these criticisms are not only evident in established discourses within schools and the popular media (there seems to be a deep suspicion of academics who are “would-be teachers”), but amongst our own colleagues there are many beginning teachers who also voice these sentiments. Throughout their pre-service education they remained seemingly dissatisfied with what was on offer. Their understandings of what it means to teach and learn were, and perhaps still are, different from our own. Close friends from our time at university regularly lament “the lack of practical strategies at uni” and have felt that “we should have been more hands-on in English method, been given a different set of activities each week”. We have often heard comments that indicate that their degrees mean very little – that they were not prepared to survive the daily teaching routine. For them the move into a teaching position was welcomed as an opportunity to actually “get real” and teach.

While we would not deny that the prospect of beginning our teaching careers was both exciting and terrifying and that in relocating from “the academy” to “the school” there was the need to adjust and adapt, we seemed to have had different concerns. From the beginning of our graduate year we noted changes in our attitudes towards teaching and learning, towards our own sense of professional growth and identity, and an increased sense of isolation in our practice. For instance, early on in the year Katrina had this to say,

Sometimes I just want to talk and talk and talk about this job forever, yet I don't feel like anyone is listening or listening to the things that I want heard. People tut-tut and yes-yes and a bandaid is offered and nothing gets discussed and you walk off to your classroom wondering why the hell you bothered.

I feel really dominated by these confident personalities and I walk away wondering what was said and what I can offer anyway. Everyone seems so set, and certain, and sure of their direction. I feel like I'm messing my way through and people tell me not to worry. 'Oh, don't worry Katrina, it's when you stop worrying that everything is fine...it's when you really don't know what you're going to do that you realise what teaching is really about.' I don't think people realise that I want to worry. I need to think it through and try to find some sense or meaning by talking through the possibilities and discussing where I am at, because that's what I learn from, that's what's going to make it meaningful for me in the end. In saying that I don't mean I don't want direction, advice, wisdom, help, etc. but it's as if I need to gather as much as I can in order for me to understand the best path for me. It seems people already know and they want to tell me the answer rather than talk about the possibilities. (Katrina Mathews, Personal Journal, 21 March, 2003)

Unlike some of our peers, we consider much of our pre-service education to have been extremely valuable. While we are not uncritical, it was here that with mentors and other academic staff, in conversations with each other that we carefully questioned and began unpacking the experiences that we were having in schools. Engaged in these conversations and rich dialogue, we stretched the boundaries of our understanding, challenging each other to look further than we could see alone. This included taking up opportunities to extend ourselves beyond the tutorial room and lecture theatre – as research subjects, workshop presenters, conference attendees, writers, readers, and son on. Katrina's reflection expresses her need to continue these practices. Ironically, in the “real world” of schools, students and morning teas, many of these opportunity-doors seem to close. In finally “getting on with the teaching”, we found ourselves quietly lamenting the loss of these collaborative, dialogic processes we had seen as integral to our professional learning as English teachers.

The realisation that the “reality” of teaching allowed little room for discussion and reflection was perhaps the hardest lesson to learn and then “unlearn”. Of course the signs were all around us – as in a good thriller or murder mystery. The first day of school, for example, was a whirlwind – 1001 meetings, no time to talk about what you had planned and were thinking and teaching the next day. While “things” were bound to be a little different, there was an expectation on our part that we would still have the opportunity to talk and receive some confirmation or affirmation that all that hard work done over the holidays preparing the best English course ever would be O.K – that it would be accepted – that *we* would be accepted. That the school and staff room space was going to continue challenging us in ways we had grown familiar with at university. Instead, we got “entry shock” (Gill, 1998). Little help was offered from other teachers in terms of sustained conversations about pedagogy and student learning. For all its good intentions, the focus on first-term “musts” and classroom “tips and techniques” promoted by induction programs left us wanting.

In an effort to somehow resist these pressures, early in the year the two of us began meeting and talking about our teaching, our lives (or what seemed to be the lack of a life outside our teaching), our successes and failures, stuff we had read, activities we had tried, sleep we had not had. These conversations became a sanctuary – a discursive space apart from our congested and contested practice space, a chance to step away and exercise some reflexivity. Looking back at it now (because we did not understand it this way when we were doing it) we see our efforts as helping one another understand and deconstruct experiences while trying to talk as we thought “professionals” might. These conversations had another element, too. Scott was

conducting an honours project into some of these issues and was reading a lot of theory and research, which we ended up sharing and working with. We brought our experiences to the table and actively attempted to theorise them. We wrote narratives about critical incidents, reflections about good and not-so-good classes, and we whinged to one another about colleagues and tough students.

However, questions over the usefulness of our conversations and actions persisted; self-questioning and self-doubt often permeated our discussions. Why weren't conversations like this a regular feature within our school settings? Did we concern ourselves with “this stuff” too much or were we just starved for sustained reflection and conversation? Did we simply have a problem with letting go of our university experience? Perhaps we were not ready to be “fully-fledged” professionals, and were “provisional teachers”<sup>2</sup> after all? Our struggle seemed different to the “practice/theory divide” other colleagues lamented. We were both unashamedly theory lovers and were not happy to just “get real”.

## LEARNING AND UNLEARNING

Significantly, through a collaborative, dialogic approach to our professional learning, we came to better understand the problems that we encountered. The isolation we felt as beginning teachers; the rhetoric that suggested we “just get on with the business of teaching”; the psychological, linear approach to teacher learning; the limitations we felt imposed upon us by the narrow English curriculum at senior levels; the pressures we felt to conform to others' ideals about effective or productive teaching practice – all of these were not ours alone. We began to understand that these dilemmas came with a “biography and history”.

The isolation we experienced was, for example, a feature of the way schools are set up and run – the conditions of teachers’ work, teaching loads, timetabling, induction processes, and so on. The focus on learning as a psychological process has roots in developmental and behavioural psychology which “has guided research on teaching and learning for generations” (Renshaw, 1998, p. 83). The frustrations we felt at narrowly conceived English curriculum grew out of how these documents and regimes were first developed and then imposed on English teachers, as if they lacked the professional expertise to design their own. Pressures to teach to an imposed system arose out of outcomes-based ideology, managerial discourses and standards-based teaching reforms – often developed away from the professional workspaces of teachers. These elements seem to be pervasive and have serious implications for teacher professionalism (Doecke, 2001; Locke, 2001). Rather than see these issues as solely our problems, a reminder from C. Wright Mills encouraged us to see differently:

Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science...must include both the troubles and the issues, both biography and

<sup>2</sup> Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT) classification for beginning teachers provisionally registered with the institute. For more information, see [www.vit.vic.edu.au](http://www.vit.vic.edu.au).

history, and the range of their intricate relations (quoted in Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 14).

We began to change, learn and grow as professionals when we understood that there are different ways of understanding these issues, that there are ways of working around them, and forming or building networks that pushed us to learn or to understand further. In order to do so we had to dig a little deeper and to make the effort to talk the issues through even when finding the time was difficult. We first learned the way it is, then we learned that it doesn't have to be this way (the whys are still coming). This is what we mean by learning and unlearning. Our involvement in the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) conference, held in Melbourne during 2003, was a major turning point in how we have come to conceive our own professional learning.

### **“DID YOU EVER WANT TO JOIN A COLLECTIVE?”**

We were invited by an experienced teacher colleague to participate in the Professional Identity and Change stand (PIC) of the IFTE conference. The idea was that if the PIC strand was indeed serious about issues such as teacher education, professionalism and learning, teacher induction and the changing role of English and literacy teachers today, then early career teachers needed to have their experiences voiced in this forum. This all sounded promising to us; it seemed like a chance to “talk shop” with committed English teachers from a variety of backgrounds. It was agreed that we would chair and present a panel-type session, with input from beginning teachers from the UK and pre-service teachers from universities around Victoria.

In preparation for the conference, the PIC strand planning group (about eight of us – including experienced English teachers and teacher educators/academics) met regularly to plan the details of our contributions to the conference. During these sessions the group engaged in rich professional dialogue. Despite our initial concerns about how beginning teacher/experienced teacher binaries might be played out, our voices were heard and our contributions were welcomed. It seemed we were adding to the discussion and we felt like part of a team. A discursive space was created for reflecting on and theorising in preparation for the conference. This space offered a source of rich learning rarely found within the day-to-day experience of our teaching. The process of connecting and reconnecting with others was powerful and what we had been craving.

The IFTE “experience” encouraged us to reflect on the change from our university education to our in-school experiences and we began to appreciate the ways in which our eight months of teaching had taught us to re-evaluate what our pre-service education meant to us and how our perceptions about education and our roles and identities as teachers had changed. We have become increasingly aware of the ways in which we have been positioned as early-career teachers – ways we did not fully appreciate or envisage throughout our pre-service education.



One of the most significant moments for us at IFTE was a keynote address by Barbara Kamler and Barbara Comber (Kamler & Comber, 2003b).<sup>3</sup> It was both refreshing and encouraging to see the manner in which this “cross-generational research project” was conceived. Teacher knowledge was valued and shared equally between experienced “mentors” and younger teachers; all were positioned as “knowledge producers” and professionals capable of their own valued practice research. Previous to this keynote we had spent many hours attempting to make sense of these issues and to find a language to voice our concerns – it seemed the keynote offered us hope, it both summarised and greatly extended our thinking.

We had both attended the 2002 Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) conference where Kamler and Comber had presented early research from the project. In 2002 the material presented seemed interesting, but that was all. In 2003 we realised how differently we had heard these similar papers – and only a year apart – first, as pre-service teachers, secondly, as first year outs. We wondered why we responded so differently. What changes had we experienced in the space of a year to warrant such a different response?

During our pre-service education we had countless opportunities to discuss issues about teaching that were important to us – within the formal classroom setting, in-between lectures over coffee and in the offices of university staff. We were positioned in ways that allowed us to not only learn from set texts and experienced educators, but also to work collaboratively and share our knowledge with our peers in order to come to new understandings. The Kamler and Comber keynote seemed to place these features of learning at the heart of their research. At the time it was hard to envisage that it would be difficult to create and maintain intellectual and dialogic spaces. We took these practices as a given and the thought that they needed to be legitimised seemed foreign.

In 2003 we were repositioned as beginning teachers who had struggled to maintain these discursive spaces and who often felt that they were not valued outside of the university environment. The Kamler and Comber keynote did indeed work to legitimise our practice and beliefs about teaching and learning. We heard our own difficulties reflected in the words of the teachers involved,

One of the most experienced teachers reported that in all the years he'd been teaching (since 1969) this was the first time anyone had *ever* wanted to know what he did and how he did it (Kamler & Comber, 2003b).

Our attention was again drawn to the historical nature of our situation. While it was new for us, a lack of continued conversations about practice has been a fixed feature of many schools and educational institutions. We had become more attuned to the language that accompanies these problems and the ways in which they are experienced. The fact that these issues were being addressed in this research, with “tangible” benefits for teachers and students, offered a promise that real change could be effected; that the way things seem to be, are not the way things necessarily must

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<sup>3</sup> This project was funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant Program (2002-2004) and entitled, *Teachers investigate unequal literacy outcomes: Cross-generation perspectives*. See also (Kamler & Comber, 2003a).

remain; that the discursive spaces we ourselves have created are a valuable part of our professional learning.

## CONCLUSIONS

While school induction processes and staff mentoring were somewhat valuable in helping us move into the daily practicalities of teaching, they largely failed to address our deeper concerns and questions about English teaching. Early in 2003 there was a real sense that the rich conversations, opportunities for reflection and the wide range of readings that had previously driven and challenged our practice and knowledge were a thing of the past – simply a part of our pre-service education. However, we are not afraid of this occurring anymore. We have other concerns, of course, but mostly these now focus around how our understandings of collaborative, dialogic approaches to learning can be developed in our classrooms with students. In many ways the shift in our own teaching cannot be measured as such, yet we believe it is evident as we struggle to implement some of the practices that we have been engaged in. The email conversation that began this paper is instructive in this sense. The rich learning opportunities that we have had are surely important for our students also. English need not be simply conceptualised and taught as a subject of never-ending essays. There are many other ways to explore English language and textual practices that are legitimate in their own right, ways to look beyond and around outcomes and what they can mean. We are developing the self-confidence to do this.

We also take comfort in the continued opportunities that flow our way. The PIC group still meets and is attempting to continue their work. There are active “transgressions” and critiques from our colleagues regarding many issues, including: the nature and teaching of English subject(s), the development of teacher accountability and performance measures, the relevance of widespread “literacy skills” testing, teacher education and professional learning. During these continuing conversations we are able to see that the environment we work within is not inevitable and that there is room for alternative voices – especially within our daily “routines”. We continue to meet and also attempt to expand our professional relationship by inviting others to participate. We are learning.

This process has not been an easy one. Having the courage to continue in these endeavours has been difficult given the current educational environment. Standards based assessment, with a focus on measurable learning outcomes, continues to suggest that we should be working alone towards easily defined outcomes that can be checked during our regular performance reviews. The IFTE experience allowed us to see that the practices we were engaged in were a powerful and valid form of learning in their own right. The nature of our friendship and our common experiences at university allowed us to comfortably voice our successes and concerns and to learn in ways that were not isolating, at least on a personal level, if not at the school level. We have come to understand the importance of the discursive spaces we have created and the conversations we have been privileged to engage in. Our professional dialogue has taken on new meaning and has moved beyond the point at which it started; yet it has not reached an end-point.

The lessons here for both university and school contexts are for more research into how graduate beginning teachers are supported and mentored. Schools must provide regular spaces for conversations that go beyond classroom management and school organisation. Universities can also offer dialogical space for graduates that will allow beginning teachers from across schools to share their experiences and critique their teaching and the wider curriculum. Professional and subject associations also have an important role to play here.<sup>4</sup> Government must also take up the challenge, especially as many are increasingly faced with ageing teacher workforces and young graduates who are leaving the profession early. Such structures for this type of learning are important in helping beginning teachers reflect back over their pre-service learning, as well as allowing them to reflect on what is happening in their classrooms and schools. Opportunities for beginning teachers like ourselves to critique, debate and even give vent in safe and supportive learning spaces seems critical for our learning and also for the continued development of strong professional identities in ourselves as English teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> There are at present a number of websites that are keen to promote this kind of professional conversation and dialogue. See for example, [www.stella.org.au](http://www.stella.org.au) and [www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/index2.html](http://www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/english/index2.html)

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