

## Editorial: English (literature) and gender: Engaging with boundaries

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In his book, *Why reading literature in schools still matters*, Sumara reminds us that English classrooms are one of only a few spaces in most school curricula for “tak[ing] one outside the boundaries of what is considered commonplace understanding” (p. 158). He explains that, “By creating pedagogical structures that include shared interpretations of literary engagements, I believe schools can continue to push boundaries of what is considered true in the world” (p. xiii).

Pushing such boundaries has become critically important as teachers and students face both increased diversity in their lived social and cultural worlds, and increased standardization of consumer and popular culture and of schooling. As Richard Beach and I posit, “In an increasingly ‘standardized world’, students are rarely encouraged to examine spaces of tension between beliefs and norms in competing social worlds. Rather, students are more likely to learn, through standards, testing and cultural homogenization, to ignore such tensions and seek monologic understandings of their worlds (pp. 267-268).”

English classrooms are an important space for challenging students to grapple with tensions and contradictions and to listen to what Bakhtin describes as “internally persuasive” voices rather than to passively accept the kinds of “authoritative discourses” (1981, pp. 136-137) that are reflected in dominant institutional rules, religion, culture or traditional authority figures, all of which create boundaries.

In this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, the contributing authors write from a variety of perspectives about the many kinds of boundaries that both function currently in our English classrooms, and that can be questioned and deconstructed through our pedagogy and practice.

The first two articles in this issue examine gender boundaries in U.S. high-school English classrooms. Amanda Godley’s article examines how borders are constructed, patrolled and crossed in one English classroom. In her study she finds that while literacy learning and the learning of gender norms and dichotomies are inextricably bound, literacy activities that question such dichotomies sometimes serve simultaneously as spaces for gender border-crossing. For instance, she examines the way that discussions of beauty in relation to Morrison’s (1970) novel, *The bluest eye*, led to less patrolling of gender borders and more crossing of such borders.

In her article, Rachel Malchow Lloyd explores the promise and the pitfalls of her implementation of peer literature circles in her own high-school classroom as a means for better meeting the needs of her male students. In her analysis, she discusses instances in which gender boundaries are both taken down and reinforced as students discuss characters and situations in literary text-worlds and as they interact socially in peer-groups. Additionally, Lloyd questions the boundary between teacher and student in positing that peer literature circles are a pedagogical practice that has the “potential to disrupt and destabilize traditional, teacher-centered, authoritative literacy practices.”

Three of the articles in this issue challenge traditional boundaries between texts and readers. Craig Morris's narrative is an exploration of his own journey toward questioning the authority of text-focused "practical criticism" or "New Criticism," and toward discovering a more balanced approach to the dynamics between texts and readers that values the internally persuasive voices of readers.

Rishma Dunlop further imagines a blurring of boundaries between readers and texts in her essay that explores the "reader's diary" as a means of connecting the reading (and re-reading) of literature with life-history narratives. Dunlop proposes that, "conventional schooling and structured reading programs have emphasized the teaching of skills which are sufficient in many ways, but the conception of reading as an art, reader as artist, may be a more powerful way of imagining the role of reading in educational life" (p. 60). She draws of Eco (1979) and Barthes (1971) in conceiving of the reader's journal as an "open text...that is not intended for passive consumption by the reader" (p. 62). Dunlop positions readers as active co-constructors of the literary texts they read – texts that become intertwined with other texts, other readers, and with life history narratives.

Like Dunlop, Stephen Elting & Arthur Firkins push teachers to think beyond traditional text-centred modes and purposes for reading and teaching poetry. In working with English language learners, they found that providing students with the opportunity to "dramatise" and, by extension, to embody poetry, promoted "the development of feeling for language through fostering creative response to text" (p. 127). They argue that it is "poetry's "indeterminacy and multiple levels of meaning [that] provide unique opportunities for ELL learners to become agents in the construction of meaning" (p. 129). Further, "introducing drama to embody the personal and creative response to poetry rather than privileging a particular authoritative or monologic interpretation can extend [students' understand of language]" (p. 129).

Another article in this issue take up the vital matter of standards as a boundary in the teaching of English. Through an analysis of New Zealand's NCEA (National Certificate for Educational Achievement) and through interviews with both teachers and students, Helen O'Neill infers that increased pressures from standards and national assessments have created an atmosphere in which poetry has become a "peripheral" rather than "preferred" element of the English curriculum. O'Neill argues that because questions from assessments apply more easily to other genres, teachers are being forced to phase out the teaching of poetry, thereby denying students access to "literary study at its most intense" and "the imaginative dimension of language" (p. 93).

Brenton Doecke, Mark Howie, and Wayne Sawyer, in their article in dialogue, reflect on the meanings behind several key words that they conceive of as sites of struggle in Australian neo-liberal and neo-conservative discourse related to the teaching of English, Western democracy and the Enlightenment. These reflections exemplify both the boundaries that can be created by language and the possibilities that conversations about "fear", "community" and "creativity" might have for challenging authoritative uses of language. In this essay the authors hope to "provoke debate about the kind of English curriculum our students need," and they invite more teachers to "join this conversation, sharing their curriculum resources and – crucially – arguing a rationale

for what they do that challenges the nostrums of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologues” (p. 139).

Finally, writing a narrative out of the context of EFL teaching in East Java, Handoyo Puji Widodo discusses a method he has developed with his own students, using computer- assisted language learning (CALL) principles, interactivity and cooperation to build on a genre-based approach to the teaching of writing.

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