

**Editorial: Lines of force: Policy, identity and English as a mode of resistance**

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This issue comes in the midst of serious social calamities and human right abuses occurring all over the world. As this is being written, shocking images of violence flash across South African television screens showing xenophobic attacks on refugees and immigrants who have escaped to that country in an attempt to reclaim some sense of dignity and safety having escaped ravishing poverty. Instead, they have been further victimized by locals who themselves are too afraid, too hungry, too angry and too tired of unkept promises, to share the little they have with those seen to be others. The act of othering can occur symbolically as well as physically, as illustrated in this year's U.S. presidential nomination process that highlights issues of race and gender.

How can educators begin to address these issues and educate youth about compassion, tolerance and empathy, particularly when the policies and practices that abound in our communities are becoming increasingly rigid and conservative? How do we as teachers and researchers ensure that what we teach, particularly in the English classroom, reaches our students and prompts them to think about their own practices and understandings more critically and within a framework of social justice? And, possibly even more importantly, how do we as teachers and researchers ensure that we do not become complacent with practices that are no longer meaningful for our students?

The English class often holds the potential for debate around issues of justice and social engagement and affords both the educator and the learners a space in which uncertainty and open-endedness is valued, where meanings are not fixed but negotiated through multiple interpretations and transactions. It is a space that is risky and difficult, where conflictual views are encouraged. The importance of spatiality in the conceptualisation of resistance was initially described by Lefebvre (in Soja, 1996, p. 35) as a "space of collective resistance" and by hooks as a space which interrogates "knowledge and information in ways that transform how we think about our social reality" (hooks, 1990, p. 6). During the process of dialogue and interaction with various texts, teachers and students can engage with sensitive topics and in so doing, they open themselves to the transformative potential of such interactions.

It is often in the English classroom with the use of role-play, drama, journal-writing and artefacts that the participants themselves take up new subject positions, engage with multiple points of identity, and in doing so, reconfigure their own identities and "habits of being" (hooks, 1990, p. 149). This resistance, or the "lines of force", is the theme of this issue. Goodchild (1996) explains that concepts such as values, expectations and social structures construct social scripts for people to take up.

Resisting these positions, he argues, does not require us to destroy the scripts but rather to add to the scripts, thereby offering a “range of digressions and alternatives that carry thought elsewhere shattering the coherence of hegemonic discourses” (Goodchild, 1996, p. 2). In this issue we read how teachers have *added* to the official scripts of teacher-student relationships as well as the official curriculum and by doing so, they have begun to disrupt hegemonic understandings.

The contributors to this issue of ETPC were asked to discuss the ways in which teachers and researchers could work toward resisting hegemonic and singular interpretations of policies and of texts. Specifically, we provided the following prompts:

- How does the subject matter of poetry, drama and fiction construct spaces of resistance that allow alternative ways of being and of understanding?
- How do teachers work with and against more technicist approaches to teaching and assessing English?
- How can the English classroom become a space where learning has a meaningful impact on students’ lives?

The first article by Fecho and Amatucci, with its apt title, “spinning out of control” exemplifies the richness of experience that occurs within an English classroom space in the U.S., when the teacher resists maintaining a strict teacher-student relationship and, instead, shares intimate identity issues with one of her students. This shift in the power relations between the student and teacher results in the student’s increased sense of self as well as his increased interest in reading. The writers argue that the dialogic and transactional nature of engagement with texts that occurs during English classes can open up spaces for both teachers and students to critically examine their own meaning-making practices.

The second article by Macken-Horarik and Morgan describes an innovative English literature course in Australia, which encourages students to develop theorised understandings of a range of reading practices. Through cleverly designed tasks that require reflexivity, students become aware of how readings are constructed and how they work to elicit particular types of reading. Such awareness is essential for the development of critical readers. Awareness of the power of texts to position their readers in specific ways is a necessary starting point for reading “against the grain” and for taking up alternative reading positions.

Yandell, in his article, “Embodied readings: Exploring the multimodal social semiotic resources of the English classroom” examines the use of multimodality to encourage embodied readings of texts in a British classroom. He describes two lessons, providing photographs to demonstrate his findings. In the first he illustrates how the use of an aerial view of the school projected on a screen captures the students’ immediate attention. This interest is sustained as the students engage enthusiastically with their teacher. Technology, Yandell argues, acts as a “bridge” to connect the students’ own geographical understanding of space and place with that of the playwright. In the continuation of the lesson, the teacher uses gesture and the space of the classroom to explicitly tap into the theatrical nuances in the play. In the discussion of his second lesson, Yandell provides a detailed description of role-plays which

demonstrate how the students draw on rich repertoires of cultural knowledge to construct meaning.

“Creative pedagogies: “Art-full” reading and writing”, by Grant, Hutchison, Hornsby and Brooke also draws on the use of multimodality within the English classroom, but this time in Melbourne. Working against a backdrop of increasing calls for “scientific literacy” and “measurable outcomes”, the authors describe how both teachers and students, when encouraged to integrate the arts into literacy teaching and learning, produce high levels of engagement and critical thinking. The authors demonstrate, through use of photographs and video clips, how various artistic devices such as books, drama, sculptures, music and theatrical props, afford students a space in which to construct their own cultural understandings of texts, and teachers a space in which to explore new methodologies to engage their students.

The fifth article takes us to South Africa where Dixon and Peake describe a study conducted at a desegregated primary school in Johannesburg on the use of a questionnaire sent to parents by the school administrators for them to provide input on the school’s language policy. After documenting the distressingly low levels of literacy in South Africa, and arguing that a primary reason for this is that few opportunities exist for mother-tongue literacy instruction in desegregated schools, the authors describe how the survey used in the school of their case study, rather than disrupt the hegemony of English medium, serves to reproduce the existing inequalities. They conclude that support and assistance needs to be given to schools and managers to enable them to become more critical and aware of their use of language and research tools in their quest to promote equality and justice in the schools.

The final article takes us back to England where we share Marshall’s concern with the repeated attempts to remove “vagueness” from United Kingdom educational assessments. He adeptly discusses how foolhardy it is to insist on the unreliability of vagueness when assessing something creative and complex like English. Using the persona of Athena, Marshall takes us through various scenarios where Athena has to make a decision on whether or not to fail her students’ work. His final recommendation is that rather than insist on the eradication of vagueness, there should be greater effort spent on increasing the competence of teachers to make knowledgeable judgments.

Complementing these six articles is a narrative, written by Mark Howie, the current President of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) and Head Teacher of English at a high school in New South Wales. Howie draws attention to the challenges faced by English teachers who are prepared to wear the mantle of office in a professional association and find themselves called upon to act as spokespersons for the profession and for particular paradigms of English in situations where the profession is being “called to account” via the mass media and other publications by extreme factions and lobbyists. Drawing on the ethical work of Levinas and Derrida, Howie provides readers with a poignant account of his self-reflexive appraisal of how he has positioned himself in his own publications in reaction to these challenges.

While written from various parts of the world in various educational and social settings, the authors of all seven of these contributions describe the potential of English classrooms to become spaces of resistance and contestation. They also stress the need for teachers to develop their own agency and professional identities as well as those of their students to ensure that multiplicity and hybridity is valued and encouraged. This collective body of scholarship points to the usefulness of innovative and creative methodologies for opening up classroom spaces that encourage and value critical thinking and social engagement.

## **REFERENCES**

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