

## **Editorial: Is there a divide between English and the communities it serves?**

EILEEN HONAN  
*University of Queensland*

JOHN HARDCASTLE  
*Institute of Education, University of London*

In asking the question: *Is there a divide between English and the communities it serves?* we extended an invitation to authors to address particular divisions between English teaching, policies, pedagogies, teachers and diverse versions of community. The results of this invitation make up this issue of ETPC. In particular, the issue reflects the diversity of versions of community, in a much deeper and more thoughtful way than is usually reflected in the use of term “diversity”. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the flows and movements of global travel in all its meanings, from tourism, through the newly attractive eco-travel movements through to the enforced travel of refugees and immigrants escaping poverty, conflict and environmental destruction, carry with them implications for the teaching of English.

In Australia today, as in many other monolingual nations, English teachers are challenged to respond to the variety and diversity of experiences of their students. For example, one of the classroom narratives in this issue describes a school where over 50 nationalities are represented in the student cohort. Assunta Knight explains the disruption of her assumptions about the English curriculum that she was using in this school, and her attempts to transform her teaching so that it more accurately reflects the plural and hybrid identities of her students. In this school, as in many others, teachers are discovering that the established English as Second Language pedagogies, and the traditional divide between these classes and conventional English classes, are not adequately catering for the complex and varied experiences and language capabilities of their students.

Karen Dooley’s article draws on interviews with students and parents, who have arrived in Australia as refugees from African nations, as well as her own experiences as a tutor for newly arrived migrants. Her paper describes the efforts made by four schools in South-East Queensland to “tackle unfamiliar configurations of need”. The challenge for these schools, and that described by Knight, is to bridge that ever-present divide between subject English and literacy skills, so that their students can build their disciplinary knowledge in all its intellectual and critical forms while at the same time mastering the basics of the code-breaking aspects of reading and writing in English.

These issues of diversity in language experiences of our student communities are intertwined and complicated by issues related to inclusion, including the integration of students with specific learning difficulties into mainstream classrooms. Christa van Kraayenoord and her colleagues attempt to shed some light on the multi-faceted nature and complexity of providing responsive and tailored instruction in writing through a case study of one “exemplary” teacher. The case study is drawn from a wider project, *WriteIdeas*, where the authors argue that teachers’ awareness of individual student characteristics, for example, in relationship to their cognitive skills, rate of learning, motivation and engagement, would allow them to be more responsive

to individual students' needs. This appears to be a relatively straightforward pedagogical approach: *know your students* – how hard could it be? Yet this is becoming a much more complex and difficult task for teachers who attempt at one and the same time to pay this particular and specific attention to each student while at the same time attend to the generalised cohort needs of any year level.

It was Kerry Taylor-Leech's attempt to critically reflect on her own inability to "know her student" that led to the classroom narrative in this issue. The vignette of a young East Timorese man in her classroom provides a powerful background to her discussion of the issues related to the commodification of English as part of aid packages to countries in post-conflict contexts. The disjuncture between experience, expectation and curriculum observed is an unfortunate result of the standardised packaging of English programs and courses so familiar to those working in English as a Foreign Language contexts in countries across the world. In these contexts, it is not English itself that is creating the divide between communities and language, but the one-size-fits-all approach of these packages, designed to be used by non-professionals with little or no pedagogical background or experience.

English was once driven by more ambitious social and cultural aspirations than is the case today. Indeed, English teachers themselves once led curriculum change. It is worth recalling these two facts in the context of current debates about English, its constituencies and its purposes. Social, cultural and linguistic diversity is a central feature of contemporary classrooms worldwide, and the ways in which teachers have responded to new responsibilities within externally framed constraints and affordances, curricula and testing arrangements is both complex and varied. So complex and so varied in fact that many English teachers and teacher educators are asking questions about how we have got to where we are in the search for new directions.

In the UK, particularly, there is a new mood of historicism among English teachers. Far from indulging in nostalgia for a "Golden Age", historically-minded English teachers are interrogating the past. In the post-war period, a handful of English teachers in the UK hammered out a set of principles and practices that aimed to connect the curriculum subject to their pupils' social realities. Social class was *the* central concern for those teachers who aimed to democratise their subject. At a moment when the existing curriculum reflected inherited, ungenerous assumptions about the educability of "ordinary" pupils, and when the priority for conservative educationists involved recovering old certainties (and restoring old hegemonies), a new generation of progressive and radical English teachers, intent on transforming the larger society, struggled to bridge the divide between the school subject, English, and the communities it served.

Such developments were not confined to the UK, of course. They played out differently in various national circumstances. Today, the prevailing international climate is one in which the teaching profession has experienced a serious loss of autonomy as well as one in which the teaching of English to the majority of students is both increasingly directed from the centre and dominated by the attainment of functional skills.

Looking back, it is plain to see that post-war developments in English in the UK represented a new-found, professional self-confidence that encouraged teachers to take it upon themselves to challenge the existing syllabus, to introduce new materials, methods and modes of assessment, and to forge new professional links and associations, especially the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE) and later, the National Association (NATE).

Simon Gibbons has been driven to ask to what extent the progress that was made in the post-war period has survived two decades of Government intervention. He writes about a sense of leading a double life. Thus, he contrasts his life as leading member of NATE and pre-service teacher education with that of researcher. Simon is presently investigating the history of LATE. Here he concentrates on the story of LATE's early struggles to reform the examination system to make it responsive to the needs – “the hopes, fears and daily lives” - of “ordinary” pupils, arguing that the principles of English that were established in the post-war period remain highly relevant and could inform a critical evaluation of English today.

Paul Tarpey looks at the professional lives of six “progressive” or “radical” secondary English teachers, who began their careers teaching in London between 1965 and 1975. Tarpey has gathered oral testimonies about English teaching in the sixties and seventies. He argues the case that the memories of English teachers are uniquely valuable for what they can tell us about teacher-led innovation, as well as for what they might contribute to discussions about the present and future state of English. Whereas much work on teachers' lives has tended to focus on individuals recalling personal experiences over a lifetime in teaching, Tarpey looks at the collective dimensions of memory, what he calls, “professional memory” (PM), concentrating on a period in which the subject was transformed. Although the social, political and educational backgrounds of the informants varied, he discovers striking similarities in the ways that they speak about their values and goals. Further to this, he notices that the contributing teachers express an abiding interest in their pupils' “ordinary” lives. Indeed, they dwell on the ways they struggled to teach children from “all backgrounds in fair and equal ways” in a manner that is remarkably similar. Tarpey considers the extent to which it is possible to speak about belonging to a “generation” of English teachers that show an undiminished willingness to engage in the politics of the subject.

Malcolm Reed writes about English teachers' responsibilities towards the pupils they teach. In his short story, “A lonesome road”, Reed speaks about the real destinations of some of his former pupils. This semi-autobiographical work grew from his insight that the armed forces have traditionally recruited from areas of high unemployment and low literacy. Reed, who now teaches in Bristol, taught for many years in an all-boys, secondary school, Hackney, one of London's poorest boroughs with a disproportionately high concentration of Black students. He comes from a family with strong links to the forces. “A lonesome road” is a many-layered, unsettling story that draws real and fictional voices into a conversation that disturbs memories and poses fundamental questions about what teaching English involves. Reed's attention to the specificities of ethnicity goes hand in hand with his concern with social class.

Kang-Young Lee offers an “article in dialogue” in this issue, recalling issues such as Volume 7, Number 2 on “Recognising diversity and difference”. Lee's study, based

on an analysis of 11 high-school EFL conversation textbooks used in Korea, focuses on culture learning. Content analysis shows that all of the textbooks neglect both the teaching of the culture-general aspect of culture learning and the small “c” target-culture learning and that representations of the Anglophone world constructs the US as a hegemonic presence and locus of cultural norms. In the final section of his study, Lee offers guidelines that need to be addressed for cultural content/information in contemporary ELT(EFL/ESL/EIL) instructional materials. Interestingly, it can be argued that Lee’s analysis does in fact resonate with the theme of this issue, since he is arguing that Korean conversation textbooks for EFL learners in that setting in some respect are not meeting the needs of students.

Today, the terms of discussions and debates in education are largely set by central Governments. And raising standards measured by external, national testing arrangements remains the major priority for state education systems. Misleadingly, comparisons are made routinely between “white working class students” and other “ethnic” groups in ways that imply that an explanation for lack of educational achievement lies in specific linguistic and cultural deficiencies within communities rather than in deep, systematic structural inequalities. In this climate, class has become something of a suppressed partner in the gender/ethnicity/class triad, and English teachers’ long-standing concern with class and community has lost focus in a world where, ironically, parental income, occupation and educational qualifications chiefly determine children’s life-chances.

Generally it would seem that our question – Is there a divide between English and the communities it serves? – has generated a series of other unanswerable questions. Can curriculum faults be attributed to the subject English? How can pedagogical practices be transformed so that our communities develop the critical and intellectually rich requirements of the English language and the literary tradition while at the same time mastering the basic literacy skills required to function in a 21st Century context where English is entrenched within a global economy, where individual communities struggle to maintain their own cultural and linguistic traditions, and where English-speaking nations such as Australia insist on monolingual policies and practices? These are questions that will continue to puzzle and trouble us, and ones we hope you will ponder as you read the contributions to this issue.