Re-engaging students disengaged with English: A unit of work on Othering

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ABSTRACT: The context for this teacher narrative is a multicultural South Australian secondary school with over 50 nationalities represented, where many of the older students are disengaged from English. A transformative moment for the writer occurred following research for here doctoral thesis, which unexpectedly challenged her thinking about the English curriculum, the ever-changing world of the young people in her school and the need to make English more accessible and meaningful for here students. That transformative experience prompted a decision to make the writer's English classroom more interactive, and to link the curriculum more directly to the students' realities. This was done by letting go of the set text and developing a unit of work on "Othering", which involved a variety of media and drew on the experiences of all students. In this way the writer aimed to challenge her Year 11 students, as she herself had been, to undergo a process of transformation.

KEYWORDS: English curriculum, student engagement, motivation, Othering, teacher narrative.

My Year 11 English class was made up of 21 female students, of varying ability and interest in the subject and in school itself. Indeed at least six students were entirely disengaged with school and in particular with subject English. Most of the class did not see English as connected in any way to their realities. They did not experience or feel success in the subject, and they did not choose to participate in the subject because it did not connect to their lifeworld (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) enough for them to see it as relevant or important. This challenged my perception of the relationship between subject English and the community it was intended to serve, and I felt obligated then to find ways to connect them to English through connecting English to their lives. The unit on Othering described in this narrative was borne out of that sense of obligation to connect English to students' lives.

The year 11 English class included a mixture of cultural heritages, including Lebanese-Italian, Polish, Italian, Greek, Vietnamese, Chinese, English and Australian. I hoped that this very diverse group of randomly selected students[1] would provide each other with opportunities to view their place in the world differently, recognizing that: "each class for each semester is a different culmination of a multiplicity of voices and energies that can only be expressed if the environment allows them to thrive and breathe*" (Zompetti, 2006, p. 4).

The students commented on their dislike of comprehension and the reliance on one, single shared text (which was often seen as having no connection at all with their own lives, but in fact as outdated and irrelevant). This startled me, as my own experience both as a student and as a teacher with set texts had always been very positive. I enjoyed the deconstruction and discussion that inevitably followed the reading of a set

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[1] The student names given in this paper are all pseudonyms

text. Teaching this new unit of work required *me* to disengage and re-engage, which was very confronting given my love of the subject exactly as it was. Maxine Greene, writing more than a decade ago acknowledged that, "if teachers truly want to provoke our students to break through the limits of the conventional…we ourselves have to experience breaks with what has been established in our own lives; we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again" (Greene, 1995, p. 107). She went on to note that it is very rare for teachers to invite student participation in shaping literacy and questioning their world through what we do in classrooms (Greene, 1995, p. 111).

This was certainly my challenge. Given that I wanted to provide students with as much variety and opportunity for accessing the Othering theme through English, I decided to use multiple texts rather than the stereotypical one shared set text. I was more than a little taken aback when one student, Laura, commented in the first week of the unit, "No text? Really? Is this English?" Clearly Laura had preconceived notions of what constituted English and not having a set text did not configure in that constitution. I did note, however, that in spite of her surprise she was neither unhappy nor disengaged further; in fact I think it caused a sense of intrigue about how this "new and improved" English might look.

Part of the challenge for me to "do English" differently was my constant concern about the assessment of this unit: there would be no standard, unitary text, so how could I assess? It was a relief and reassurance to read of other professionals, in different times and locations, writing and observing that too often we as teachers focus on the product instead of the process. The process is where learning really occurs, otherwise "[e]ducation becomes silly – a pointless game whose significance and pleasure have been lost" (Probst, 1984, p. 124; also Grant & Sachs, 1995; Greene, 1995; Barrell & Hammett, 2000; Zompetti, 2006).

THE UNIT OF WORK AS IT EVOLVED

Achieving a deep understanding of Othering was not itself the focus of teaching, as it might have been in a cultural studies approach; rather it was through this theme that I aimed to re-engage the students with English. At the time of preparing the unit of work, there had been some problems in the school around difference and accepting each other's cultural heritages. This very real issue (one which all of my students recognized) provided a way for us to discuss questions of identity, difference, how we stereotype and label others, and how our own agency within that labeling can perpetuate the idea of "us" and "them" – Othering.

Introducing the unit

The introduction to this new unit needed to have an impact on the Year 11 students in order to stimulate their interest in the content to follow. I therefore constructed a PowerPoint presentation consisting of individual slides of single words and single images, and asked students to write stream-of-consciousness responses to the slides. The images came from the photo language series – *Photolanguage Australia: Human values* – available since 1986 (Cooney & Burton). Half of the 58 slides were single words, such as "culture", "different" and "nerd", and the other half were images.

I chose images that I thought would evoke various emotive responses from the students, which did indeed occur. This was especially affirming because of my concern that stream-of-consciousness writing would prove either too challenging and unfamiliar or too cumbersome and boring. Instead, once this concept of writing was understood, students were very open to writing in this way.

Following the visual representation we discussed our responses. These included personal experience, which also emerged later in their personal journals. At this stage, I introduced the term "Othering", defining it as *ways we show our disconnection from each other,* for example, stereotyping and prejudiced or racist comments focusing on appearance, age, race, cultural heritage, place of birth, and so on. The students connected with this new term more easily than I had anticipated, the PowerPoint proving an effective way to begin the unit. The visual and electronic medium allowed easy access, the words and images together giving all of the students (even those who found the task challenging and daunting) something to relate to and an opportunity to express their own connection with the images.

The response that students wrote in their stream-of-consciousness pieces varied considerably. An example is below:

Figure 1. Black and white image of passengers on an old-style train carriage

Students' written responses:

Xuan:
1. bus
   war
   train
   photography
   olden day

Paris:
1. train, tired, depressed, escape, sorrow

Kirsty:
   Train people look sad C3121 old lady looks uncomfortable man with something to hide…

The subsequent spoken responses included experiences of feeling left out and how isolating that can feel. A number of characteristics leading to Othering were identified by the students, such as weight, suburb of residence, single status, wealth, cultural heritage, dress and English proficiency. One student, Jane, referred to her dad's experience the day before when he was asked by his employer to sit a written test for a promotion for which he was overdue in spite of his work ethic being excellent and his job well done. This was significant because Jane's dad is an immigrant from Poland, whose English continues to be limited. Jane was affronted that he was "Othered" in this way.

Another student, Dana, remembered feeling embarrassed in primary school for having an "unusual" lunch. Coming from a Lebanese-Italian cultural heritage, she was teased about the exotic food packed for her lunch. Dana noted how at this school now, the sight of "exotic" food (she mentioned spring rolls, rice, pasta and curries) is a daily occurrence, not worthy of mention.

Overall the PowerPoint elicited exactly the thinking and reflecting I had hoped and laid an excellent foundation for the rich, layered and sometimes confronting discussions that followed over the weeks.

The tone generated and the discussion created in this first lesson was of shared experience and ideas and themes of prejudice and isolating each other. These negative themes were strong, and it was important to end the lesson on a positive, hopeful note. I therefore moved the class into a discussion on how we act against such examples of Othering. Again the responses were indicative of the thoughtfulness and openness of the group. Contributions included:

- Being careful what we say;
- Not accepting when we hear friends "Other";
- Get to know the person / facts before assuming (Othering).

Finally I explained that the focus of the unit would be on one way we Other in regard to culture, particularly people's cultural heritage. When we unpacked what cultural Othering looked like, the students were quick to realise the connection between cultural Othering and other ways we Other. For example, they identified Othering in regard to language, dress (for example, the hijab, which a growing number of the school's most recent enrolments wear), food, appearance and traditions.

Texts of Othering: Diverse voices

It was fundamentally important that the voices from which the students would learn would not just be my own or those of their peers and themselves (Zompetti, 2006). I collected articles and biographies (written texts) to highlight the theme and to show how Othering was experienced by a variety of people at different times and in different contexts. One such article, used early in the unit, impacted greatly on the class. This was *Narratives of survival* by Stuart Rintoul (2005). The article reviewed a coolection of biographical narratives edited by Natalie Huynh Chau Nguyen: "A new book explores the traumatic journeys and resilience of 12 Vietnamese women who fled communism to resettle in Australia, where they now feel at home…" (p. 11).

The article included factual information (for example that there were 200,000 Vietnamese people in Australia – about 1% of the population) and a haunting photograph of a boatload of refugees cramped and exhausted. What struck the students was the treatment of refugees on their journey to Australia, especially the women. One excerpt in the article is from Phuong's story:

> She fled...with her two young sons aged seven and six. After three days, her boat was taken by pirates searching for gold. More than 100 people were murdered. Her youngest son was thrown into the sea.
>
> "They threw my child away," she says. She was forced onto one of the pirate boats. She did not see her other son again. "They raped me so many times I asked them to let me jump into the sea," she says. "I just wanted to die. When I was too exhausted, I prayed for my child [the son who had been thrown overboard by the pirates] to pull my legs into the sea, so that I could die peacefully" (p. 11).

The students were horrified. The students of Vietnamese heritage nodded their confirmation of such horror stories, having heard them from family members. I sensed disbelief and awe at the real-life terrors experienced by people not so far removed from themselves. Phuong's narrative provided the means through which students of Vietnamese cultural heritage in the class could feel validated in their collective experience as refugees, and in turn their peers could see them in a new light. Crowley (1997) notes the importance and potency of personal voice and that "personal narratives / autobiographies are crucial sites of histories suspected, unknown and unknowable" (p. 130).

Aware of the visual world which the students inhabit (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), I decided that the inclusion of even a few excerpts of films would be beneficial in helping the students engage with the theme of cultural diversity and Othering. The films I chose were *Looking for Alibrandi* (Woods, 2000; originally a novel by Melina Marchetta) about a teenage girl, Josephine (Josie) Alibrandi, with an Italian cultural heritage and how she deals with the issues of freedom, relationships with boys, and a terrible family secret which is inadvertently exposed. A number of cultural traditions are also presented, including making pasta sauce and family gatherings, and these highlight her dual identity as Italian daughter and Australian student. The other film was the 1982 film *Moving out* (Noonan) about a teenaged boy, Gino, and his struggle with identity as a second-generation Australian. The divide between him and his parents was clear – they were newly arrived, Italian was their first language, and they were moving into a new home, of which they were very proud but from which Gino felt ostracised. He just wanted to be "free" and find his own identity.

The themes proved universal. Although not as powerful as the written texts (such as the article discussed above), the film text excerpts complemented the discussions that preceded and followed.

Over the following weeks, students engaged in four activities, which involved rotation in small groups These activities were:

a) personal response to an auto/biographical story;
b) comprehension of newspaper excerpts on the Cronulla Riots in New South Wales which took place in December, 2005;

> c) interview of a peer that they saw as an "other" to themselves, with a report and reflection on the interview;
> d) taking photographs which demonstrated how the school addressed "Othering", and writing about the photographs.

The first two were not overly popular with the students, reflecting as they did a fairly traditional "English" activity. The interview activity they found challenging because it required them to reflect on themselves in constructing someone as "other" and because they were concerned that the interview process itself should not be an act of Othering. Their evaluations of this activity and of their learning through it were nevertheless high. The photograph activity was enjoyed as different and creative, and comments reflected the students' new awareness of the ways the school addressed Othering in the physical environment. I had decided to introduce journaling as an integral part of the learning journey, in order to provide ongoing occasions for writing, but in a non-threatening process. However, this presented a challenge for me, since I had never been able to engage with journaling and yet felt that I too, like my students were expected to, should take it on and be open to it. Accepting this meant accepting that I too was a student in this class and not the "expert", which was the position to which I was more accustomed. It did ultimately prove to be a very valuable tool for all of us in processing and reflecting in an independent and very personal way.

Summative task

For a number of years and with various classes I have included a summative task that was designed by negotiation with the students. That is, the students determined their own means of demonstrating what they learned from the unit studied together. This process begins by discussing with the students, at the conclusion of a unit of work, what the key learning and content features have been. These are then shaped to become the criteria for the final summative task. The students are given the opportunity to work within these mutually-agreed criteria as guidelines to create their own final task, which needs to show what they have learned.

The students were not used to this type of task. In fact, about four students commented both verbally and in their journals that they found it challenging to have to decide how their summative task would look.

> Jackie: At first I would have rather been given the assignment instead of thinking of one myself.

> Catrina: I found this English assignment very stressful having to independently choose a task.

Zompetti (2006), in his own class, found a similar response when he gave students opportunities for reflection, growth and liberation: "At first, the participants of this exercise were hesitant, even scared, at the prospect of writing something that originally seemed so abstract…" (p. 10).

I have discovered over the years that the more the students are given the opportunity to own this task, the keener they are to engage in it and the more potential they show for creativity and extending themselves to think differently about what they have

learned and how to demonstrate that learning. Negotiating the summative assessment is a better way to elicit deep thinking and ownership than to prescribe only one way of assessment. It forces the students to think in a new way about the purpose of their learning and how to demonstrate that learning. This is very different from the usual practice of being told what has been learned and how we as teachers want it regurgitated (Giroux & Shannon 1997; Zompetti, 2006).

There is always the subtle and ever-present fear that when one relinquishes authority in this way the students may take advantage and choose not to engage at all. I did harbor some fears, though they were quickly allayed. Almost from the outset students chatted with each other and with me, playing with ideas and scribbling notes and drawing plans in their journals. It was a great hubbub of activity that was testament to their ability to analyse and think creatively. The final task required the students to demonstrate what they had learned during the unit, and to do this through whatever means they wished. Some examples students put forward included types of genre, for example narrative, script, essay, as well as various media, such as brochure, poster, PowerPoint. The criteria also included a 200-word reflection of the process undertaken to create the final product.

Table 1 contains a list of the choices students made about their final product:

	Product type	Specific product
WRITTEN	Narrative	Children's story; older children's story; young adolescent fiction
	Personal narrative	Personal review
	Reflection	Reflection
	Exposition	Editorial
		TOTAL = 6
	Final product type	Specific product
VISUAL WITH WRITTEN REFLECTION	Art work	Abstract art work (2) Painting (2)
	Collage	Photo collage Four collages Digital collage Advertising campaign
	Poster	Brochure Poster (3)
	PowerPoint	PowerPoint story / music clip PowerPoint examples of Othering
		TOTAL = 14

Table 1. Summative products

What follows is a selection of student work. Preceding each piece is a quote from the student whose work is presented, which comes from either their required reflection piece or their journal. Jane did not submit a reflection with her final product.

Written narrative: Children's Story

> Melissa: Many times I have tried to write a story and it has been difficult for me but with this children's book it came naturally, I didn't feel any pressure or stress trying to figure out what I should write….(journal)

Below are five images from Melissa's children's story. She created all of the images herself, quite an achievement, not having used the program beforehand.

Figure 2. Children's Story

Written narrative: Young adult fiction

Below is an excerpt from "The Typical Australian" by Jane:

> As she climbed upstairs, avoiding all her parents' questions about her night, Anna mulled over the events of that evening. At first she had thought that the Djallis were weird, freaky, different. And they were. But the more time she spent with Caetel and her family, the more Anna realized that they were just like any family. There was a father that was too protective, siblings who were overly annoying (albeit good looking), and a mother that kept everything together.
>
> They were typical Australians.

….They had different skin, they liked different things, and they weren't the same, which was what made them unique. But despite all that, what it really came down to was that Anna was just as much an Australian as Caetel, or the Asians or the wogs were. It didn't matter that Anna was blonde and loved surfing and it didn't matter that Caetel loved reading and wore a hijab, they were Australian all in their own way.

Letter to the editor

Laura: I chose [a letter to the editor] because I thought it would be a strong way for me to express myself by creating an opinionated piece of writing…[also] because of a conversation I had with a girl in my [English] class about cases of Othering that she has experienced and it inspired me to write this letter expressing exactly how I feel….The part I found easiest…...was actually writing it because it was just a matter of putting down how I felt on paper and then transforming it into a letter. I am glad that I chose to do this for my assignment because I believe I did well and I had a great opportunity to say how I really feel.

Here follows an excerpt from "Othering in Australia" by Laura:

Dear Editor

……Australia is still a multicultural country, but we still struggle to accept people that are different, people that are "Other". Australia was greatly affected by the 9/11 tragedy and sadly this is reflected in the way we treat our newest Australians. But I ask you, editor, what makes an Australian? Perhaps it is the way we wear our thongs or slave over a sizzling barbeque, or maybe even the way we greet our mates with "G'day"? or is it our love of freedom, and accepting others whilst at the same time enjoying our own individuality?

….Jane has every right to be accepted as an Australian instead of being Othered. To me she is not Chinese nor is she Australian, she's just Jane from my class. Why, dear editor, can't people just accept people for who they are?

As a young person I do not want to live in a world where we Other everyone that is different to us …..So I ask you editor and all of your readers, what are you going to do about Othering?

Laura is a student disengaged with English, mostly because she has experienced limited success in recent years. However, she did enjoy this task and we spent much time discussing it and how the writing piece would be structured. I was reminded again how success means different things for different students, and that it is our duty as teachers and educators to tap into that to better engage them.

Art work

Kirsty: My project… (I hope) makes people think about their individual status on the issue. I want it to make people think – are you a target? Are you the one targeting? Or are you acting as the voice for the targeted? There's an old saying, "if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem". I think this is very true in context with othering because if you don't speak up when you see someone being targeted, then you're just as bad as the targeter. Mr Simons* [teacher at the school] once said to me "bad things happen when good people say nothing". This is exactly the point of my piece. Imagine if Nelson Mandela never spoke up during apartheid, or if Susan B Anthony never spoke for women all around America. These are the people that

changed the world. If we follow their example on a smaller scale, we can make a difference. If my piece can just make people think about how they deal with 'Othering' for just a split second I'll be happy if we can stop 'Othering' all together, we will no longer have to fix the destruction it leaves behind, [journal]
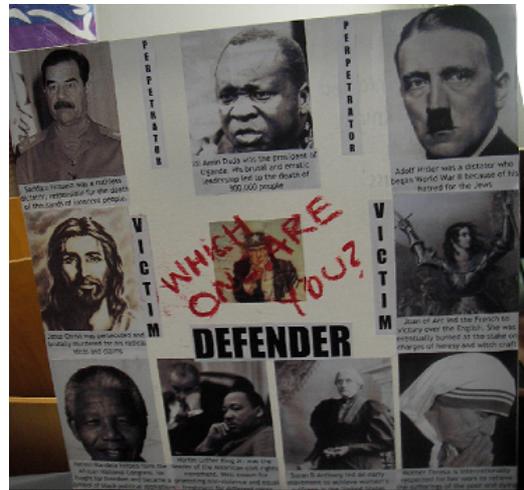

Figure 3. Othering art work

Collage

Kath: I made a collage of images with a ripped newspaper background. The images are of people whom it is easy to make assumptions of. I have labeled the people with words that are entirely possible and reasonable yet thought to be highly unlikely. Our society has deemed these descriptions not probable and has assumed certain things of people with certain characteristics by finding my descriptions unusual, the viewer is proving my point….the newspaper collaged in the background symbolizes society, and the media's input into the assumptions we make of people, [journal].

Figure 4. Othering collage

2. *Digital collage*

Julie: It is really hard to put the correct emotions in this [final task] because I don't want it to sound like what I'm not feeling. I think that is the biggest challenge. I have the exact thoughts and feelings in my mind but cannot put them into the right words.

I am very happy with the finished product and I think it says all I believe I really enjoyed this assignment because I am getting to show my emotions, and in a lot of other subjects I can't because it is not set in the criteria, but this assignment is my own opinion of what othering is and how I see it. Many other people decided to write an essay or a narrative story, but I chose to do something that I am passionate about so I could show passion in it; I believe that the image I have created is saying that I am passionate about othering, and that I HATE it. Before this unit of othering I had no clue it even existed and I was unaware of the damage it can do to other people's self esteem, it can also cause wars and suicide [from journal].

Figure 5. Othering Digital collage

Julie, like Laura, is ordinarily a disengaged student of English (by her own admission) though has a passion for creative and visual arts. She relished the opportunity to exercise her talent in that area and experienced a sense of achievement and validated herself as a contributor to our class, not just as a passive member, which was previously the case .

The comments made by the students showed thought and maturity. This was, to me, an example of the power of English in bridging the gap between the institution of school and the students' "real world".

Student evaluation

Part of being committed to bridging the gap between school and the beyond-school world is to genuinely seek feedback from students. In doing so there is a subconscious acceptance that as educators we are learners more than we are experts, and that if our role is to serve our student communities then we must seek their feedback and apply that to our practice. No mean feat, but vital if our classrooms are to be real places of meaning and learning.

The results show that the students overall enjoyed the unit and saw value in it being taught again. Vu, for example, learned about skills and tendencies on which she needed to work:

> Vu: The tasks throughout the course were mainly enjoyable because of their flexibility but sometimes I felt lost because I did not know how to begin a task. It was discovered that my time management skills need improvement because of my tendency to procrastinate and leaving things to the last minute

As a teacher it was extremely affirming to find that not only did the new unit create a new awareness but that the discussions that evolved turned out to be the aspect that was most liked. Some students reflected in their evaluations and in their journals that they would have preferred more class discussions and less written components.

CONCLUSION

Overall the unit was successful in that it opened up English in a new way for the students. At the very least, they were presented with an alternate possibility; where they saw no connection and were disengaged with English (and perhaps school in general), this unit evidently challenged that assumption. The students saw themselves as real contributors to reducing the perpetuation of Othering, and this meant the possibility of their contribution to other aspects of their realities. I too was transformed through the unit. I had to let go of my assumptions and set text safety blanket and remind myself of my real purpose – to serve this community, of students, through English, in an engaging, relevant and meaningful way.

Maxine Greene (1995) captures, eloquently I think, the challenge for us as educators in bridging the divide between the classroom (and our world as teachers) and the real world (in which our students must navigate): "…by now most of us are finding out how necessary it is to discover how the things we want to teach appear to young people who are often so unlike our remembered selves" (p. 188).

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