Editorial: English afloat on a digital sea

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It seemed appropriate to all three of us as editors of this special edition of ETPC, *English afloat on a Digital Sea,* for us to be widely dispersed globally across three locations and to be charged with using technology to overcome our physical separation to produce a coherent journal and accompanying editorial. Further separated in terms of time zones, we met virtually on a number of occasions, at early mornings and late nights; our greetings used the whole spectrum of what might be considered usual: "Good Morning", "Evening" and "Afternoon" – we tried to be inclusive – but it was all a bit confusing. In the name of equity, so that the same person did not always get up early, we swapped about our arrangements and variously talked through Skype, used Google docs and emailed in order to bring together the articles we have for you here. It has been a pleasant and interesting task, not least because we have been able to negotiate at first hand the problems that technologies sometimes throw at us, as well as enjoying the benefits of being able to collaborate and produce documents that are written by "distributed authors" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Each time Catherine lost her connection with Skype, Kevin and Julia joked that she had "fallen off" because of being at the bottom of the globe.

But our dispersed authorship has gained us additional benefits than those commonly known to those who work together online: the sense of community, through jokes extenuated over time, through developing our ideas about this special issue, and seeing writers reporting on English teaching, and its connections with technologies. Some of the articles you see here talk about the ways in which teachers have sought to tap into the benefits offered by new technologies, but who have sometimes taken a step back into the more comforting and less risky domains of "old literacy practices" because of the challenges raised by the new. These difficulties have sometimes been practical – accessing the technology and making it work; sometimes pedagogical – how can we fit these new things into "old domains"; sometimes to do with lack of know-how, or even confidence. Like some of the writers whose work is included in this selection, we have found the metaphor of a stormy sea apt; the vision of "subject English" being rocked about by the stormy waters of digital technology. In this metaphor, English, the seaworthy ship packed with crates of books and quills, is tossed on the waves, but remains, despite the turbulent, changing waters, above the fray.

However, we have also pondered that maybe this image is not so helpful. What if, rather, subject English is not pictured as afloat and tossed by the fray, but actively flowing within it? What if the boundaries between subject English and digital

technologies are seamless? We would not argue that to use new technologies is the only way to "do" English, but where technologies are used appropriately, we would hope that they would not seem "add on", exotic or superfluous. We would want to see the "literacy bit" as being difficult to separate from the "technology bit".

So, what of a sea change? In taking up as editors the theme of *English afloat on a Digital Sea,* we have noticed that all the authors of this edition of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* have in some way addressed the issues of time and change, and of authenticity. These themes have emerged in different guises across the articles, with all having in common the desire for literacy practices to be authentic, that is to say, about practices that have their roots in, or can be transferred across, other spaces outside official classroom spaces. Further, there is a sense across the articles that the use of new technologies potentially provides opportunities for shifts in practice that would make authentic literacy practices more possible in the Twenty-First Century than before; that the potential for merging home/school sites, for the blurring of boundaries, is more achievable than before. As such, the notion of fluidity rather than an object "afloat" is present in discussions of "the authentic." Yet, the articles argue, we need, as educators, to reconsider the way we have been working and be adaptable in what we do in order to invest in this potential.

Further, while all address change, the articles take different positions with respect to time and change. A number focus on the influence of the past upon the present, or the contrast between the two, whether that is to look back at how digital technologies have changed English classrooms and teaching as do Jewitt, Bezemer, Jones, and Kress; or to look at the ways in which past practices, expectations, and pedagogical and assessment regimes, create conflicting discourses and frameworks for what is possible. In a very real sense, all are present focussed, but some, such as Davidson's account of a young family's interaction around the computer in the home, are almost exclusively so, with a simple focus on what is. This home-based study, and the picture it paints of out-of-school usage and interaction, is in sharp contrast to those articles dealing with "present" realities in school, where the drag of the past often mitigates teachers' efforts to envisage and enact a "Digital English" that will take the subject into the future, and that will reflect and respond to their students' digital worlds. A future focus, albeit anchored in the present, is particularly evident in those articles dealing with visions of assessment grammars and rubrics that encompass multimodalities including print literacy, including articles by Macken-Horarik, and Wyatt-Smith and Kimber. These articles, while anchored in the present, look forward to imagine what might be needed to support curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, that will explicitly enable digital English to realise its full possibilities. Merchant, further, looks to the present and future of Web 2.0 realities and wonders whether schooling will be expansive enough to absorb participatory practices, or will it domesticate the living energy out of them.

A curious view of the scales of history presents itself in relation to the digital. Jewitt, Bezemer, Jones, and Kress offer a "historically comparative picture of the latest waves of policy and technological changes that have occurred between 2000-2006 and discusse their impact on the practices . . ." (A history stretching back only 9 years ensures we're dealing with a recent era!) Nonetheless, the contrasts among types of changes identified are striking. These changes are not necessarily mutually supportive, but run in different directions. There are ontradictions and tensions

between these forms of change: in the digital landscape of the classroom, with new equipment (for example, interactive white boards), new practices, new policies emphasizing technology in schools; the expansion of technological and cultural frames; alongside questions raised at the institutional level by educational modernization, and especially policy interventions that standardise classroom practices.

Jewitt, Bezemer, Jones, and Kress also engage with the topic of authenticity, but more in relation to textual layering and interaction, than the incorporation of digital practices external to schooling. The authors foreground the role of learner, such as through the display of student-made texts in a lesson in 2005. There is a blending of the semi-private with the public, with image, colour and layout seen as as central to the classroom as writing and speech. The authors note the move toward capturing and displaying the work of students, and a rhetoric of "democratisation". The boundaries between canonical texts and texts of the everyday have changed. While authenticity per se is not a central focus, some issues emerge in interesting ways. This is apparent, for example, in the contradictions inherent in practices such as using student-generated material on the one hand but bringing it (on the other hand) into focus for all to inspect (on the interactive white board), and perhaps, for all to judge according to some standard. This in itself creates anomolies – the "authentic" itself becomes almost a kind of currency; at the same time as English classes are enriched through the incorporation of what technologies make possible, there is a simultaneous move for the authentic to become some kind of capital that can be viewed, organised, and evaluated within the institution.

The relation between in- and out-of-school literacy knowledge and practices runs through all the articles in this issue. However, some contexts seem to facilitate the move to digital English more readily than others. In the view of some authors, the effort required to achieve a real shift in teaching and curriculum in the school context is considerable, perhaps insoluble. In her study of how teachers in four primary classrooms in Australia incorporated digital technologies into English, Honan utilises the metaphor of the sea to make the point that at times teachers who "work with digital texts...swim against the tide of normative and conventional literacy routines of the classroom." To underline the hardships entailed in doing so, she calls on the analogy of the rip – a treacherous stretch of current on ocean beaches which can sweep unwary swimmers way off course, often quite dangerously. In the classrooms she studied, Honan found "competing versions" and "contradictory accounts" of "tension" and "fighting against"; the classroom is an arena where it seems that a literacy pedagogy battle is taking place and where success is described as "improbable".

As with Jewitt *et al.,* the digital classroom is characterized by contradictions. Such a climate is seen as the result of rapid technological development (and an emphasis on acquiring equipment) which is taking place against a backdrop of increased assessment regimes and a pressure for teachers to be seen to value traditional classroom rituals and literacy practices. This is the nature of the rip – the antagonism within the classroom of two forces acting against the other – almost a time shift, where tradition and entrenched assessment requirements are pulling teachers in one way, while new technologies seem to require a new, futuristic, direction to be taken. She writes that "well-travelled and heavily trodden pathways of traditional academic

literacy discourses are difficult to steer away from when teachers attempt to map their own journeys using discourses associated with new literacies." Honan is describing how teachers are inhabiting a type of time-space shift, where two time-zones co-exist, in a dislocated way, not matching up. Like rip-tides, these dislocations can be powerful and yet reside under the surface of practice. Honan's and Jewitt *et al.*'s work is valuable in making them visible.

This phenomenon has in the past been described as the "old wine in new bottles syndrome" – a syndrome typically exemplified when new new digital technologies are used in ways more commensurate with old literacy practices, also bringing to bear arguments around authentic practices. The situation for the teachers in Honan's project is untenable: they are unable to satisfy all the demands of schools in providing what the school sees as "basic skills", while attempting to provide a relevant curriculum for 21st-century citizenship. Thus, Honan observes a series of hybridised practices which effectively marginalise the students' out-of-school literacy experiences and expertise in using technologies. Her study shows that the potential of technology is not invested in to its fullest extent and so the in-school uses are "less mature" and inhibited. She makes a plea for pedagogical routines that open up new spaces for new practices by using pedagogies that allow for the combination of many types of text-making to co-exist.

While teachers may struggle, amid such contradictions, dislocations and tensions, in out-of-school contexts such distinctions have little meaning. Davidson's study, like others reported elsewhere, shows that in non-school contexts students make these connections quite easily, and are often fluent users of "new" technologies. Davidson's research into children's home-based literacy practices sees the children and their families making easy transitions to, from and across paper-based and screen-based texts. Her article offers a fine-grained analysis of two, very young children and their parents researching lizards in a seamless integration of digital and print-based sources – Google and Wikipedia, books off the shelf. The ubiquity of digital practices, and the ease and familiarity with which these children and their parents use new technologies, is established at the outset. Any division between "old" and "new" forms of text simply does not arise; the children and their parents draw effortlessly on both in pursuit of the larger focus of their research. The task itself is very similar to those schools so often require, yet so often schools artificially perpetuate print-digital divides. Davidson argues the need for a change in mindset and practice in schools, so that "old learning" does not hold back transformed practice.

Merchant makes a very similar argument, and cautions against a techno-centric perspective on change that would put faith in the transformative potential of Web 2.0 technologies without deliberate changes in mindsets and pedagogies. As the article by Jewitt, Bezemer, Jones, and Kress demonstrates, digital English requires a shift in mindset, curriculum and pedagogy, and the reconceptualisation of English within digital terms. Within this enterprise, assessment practices and frameworks are central to any change. The articles by Macken-Horarik and by Wyatt-Smith and Kimber each take up the issue of assessment. Each article looks at the consequences of taking on a fuller gamut of multimodal texts and literacies, and the need for assessment frameworks that support the expansion this makes possible. Both see current practice in English classrooms in Australian secondary schools as already dealing with multimodal texts, and argue for a contemporary grammar ("grammatics", to use the

term Macken-Horarik employs) that will provide an inclusive framework and language for teachers and students to describe multimodal texts, including verbal and visual forms. In the case of these two articles, the focus is on future needs, growing out of what is perceived as a problematic in present times. Both articles provide "solutions" – frameworks that respond to the gamut of what multimodal meaning-making might be.

Like Honan, Macken-Horarik sees institutionalised practices – in this instance testing regimes – as pulling curriculum and pedagogy back towards older, more traditional forms. Taking a Hallidayan perspective, she argues that the problem with the use of traditional grammar, which characterises most current practice, is not so much that it tends to be logocentric rather than multimodal (though this in itself is a problem) as that it tends to be used for correction rather than identifying potential – that is does not do enough to account for what students are trying to do. There is a problem too, she argues, with teachers' knowledge of language and their confidence that they have such knowledge, and she argues for the need for greater education in this area. Macken-Horarik is not so much concerned with the mismatch between in- and out-of-school forms of text and literacy, as with the mismatch between current grammars available to teachers and a new grammar that would adequately describe a range of texts and enable teachers to talk and write about similar movements or phenomena, when students use a mix of forms in an integrated way (for example, "voicing", point of view). The article starts from the assumption that students are already presenting multimodal texts to teachers, that teachers are familiar with some grammars extending beyond print already (for example, visual grammars), but that more is required. The problem is that assessment systems and teachers' knowledge about language are not sufficient to deal with multimodality; her article is thus a plea for a "finessed and comprehensive analytical tool kit" that is up to the task.

Wyatt-Smith and Kimber similarly looking forward from the present, in arguing for the need for a grammar for describing multimodal texts and engagements. Their article does this work in a review manner of work that has highly influenced new literacies, traversing The New London Group, Kress and others, and concepts such as design, visualization of literacy, modes and modal affordances, and so on. The authors propose some new terms from their own work to add to this grammar, including "transmodal operation" and "staged multimodality". So, on the one hand, this piece is starting from the present and reaching forward, while on the other it is very Hallidayan in its vision, so could be said to be reaching backward for a framework for how to create new frameworks for assessment. Where it gets even more interesting with respect to time and change, is that that article starts to push away from grammar-centric visions of what's needed to talk about "the challenge of dynamic multimodality" in terms of Web 2.0. The key question, it seems, is what happens when we are no longer talking about fixed texts as points of assessment (that may need new frameworks, but still hold still in time and space), but are now talking about processes, movements, dynamic connections. They end with a kind of plea for "dynamic tools" of assessment, which seems to be mostly a holding place – a desire for something we clearly don't have much of and something that's even hard to imagine. While this article has little direct emphasis on "authenticity", as it focusses very heavily on schooled practice and assessment, the concern with assessing dynamic practices and processes of learning that are moving and changing (rather

than final products alone) veers toward the authentic in concept, and presents new challenges.

As a number of articles emphasise, teacher education has an important role. Dymoke and Hughes focus on pre-service work with English teachers-to-be. Their article takes seriously the need to support teachers in experiencing new ways of working with new technologies and describes a project that brings together the ancient art of poetry writing into the realm of wikis; they show how teachers' prior knowledge and skills can be valued at the same time as giving them new directions. This interesting combination allows the time shifts to co-exist in a more comfortable, less dislocated way than the position Honan observed in her case study schools. Working across two locations, the poetry wiki project, in Canada and the UK, provided professional development that utilised technology to aid collaboration and to teach about new practices. The coming together of the two groups of teachers could not have happened without the technology and so in this way the literacy practices were dependent on the technology – it was not "add on", "separate", or optional. This integration within activity seems a crucial ingredient for authenticity.

The subjects in this study share characteristics with those described by Davidson, whose article focuses on the home practices of the very young, who seamlessly move between digital and print-based resources, according to what they need to fulfill any activity they have in mind. In Dymoke and Hughes' project, teachers used a wiki to share work on poetry and to also develop their digital skills. In this way there is a synthesis of old and new literacy practices brought together, with each being essential to the task. Dymoke and Hughes were drawn to the use of a wiki, since this format helps to challenge hierarchies of power. The work does what Merchant in his article describes as opening out participation. At the same time, Dymoke and Hughes draw on research which argues that teachers need to model themselves as writers and readers in the classroom – and in this sense they are showing ways in which they value traditional practices as well as the new.

In his article – present, past and future focussed – Merchant presents a vision of what digital English might (and in some instances does) look like, as it incoporates Web 2 technologies that have been taken up outside of school and are now being taken up inside school as a potential engine for change. At the same time, however, it's also possible for schools to limit this potential, and for new technologies to be used to perform old routines, somewhat as Honan observed in the classrooms in her study. Discussing the value and implications of many Web 2.0 features for Digital English – particularly presence, modification, user-generated content and social participation – Merchant argues that it is nonetheless not simply the case that Web 2.0 technologies will bring a form of participatory learning to schooling, even though it potentially could. His article points to the future. He makes the case that much of the thinking about what such practice would/should look like as participatory school learning is yet to be done.

Authenticity features strongly. The article is imbued with a strong sense of the "real world" flavour of some uses of Web 2.0 (for example, Mrs. Cassidy's blog) in contrast to the overly-schooled uses that shut down what would be a real (new) world meaning of Web 2.0 participatory culture. Characteristics of the authentic are highlighted: coordinated action, affinity spaces, user-produced content, and more. In

the course of his discussion of Web 2.0 and its implications for schooling, Merchant adduces media theorists in this area such as Jenkins and the vision they offer of participatory culture and what that might mean. Such visions are important, argues Merchant, but need to be adapted in the context of the school. Jenkin's "utopian vision of a fully-networked participatory culture" that "aims to directly influence educational practice and policy" has much to offer, particularly when linked up with "explicitly educational" initiatives such as the European Charter describing cultural, critical and creative engagements in media. The authentic is principally described here as a form of participation. Web 2.0, he argues, extends and elaborates our notions of participatory learning as they have been historically framed.

As we look across the articles, one thing that becomes clear once again with respect to the present and futures of digital technologies in English classrooms is that these possible relations, as we imagine them, plan them, and enact them, extend far beyond technical tools. These relations include institutional structures and possibilities for institutional change; they include old and new mindsets – cultural and social ways of thinking and doing; they include inherited "grammars" of text interpretation and production, and the limits of the grammatical framework altogether; and they include possibilities of teacher education. They also include, as we have sketched in this editorial, our own assumptions as educators about change, as well as our shifting visions of where "the authentic" is located and what it appears to be in classrooms. These relations are indeed a vibrant and churning sea upon which English is now floating, or, as the articles seem to suggest, into which English, moving among the tides, is becoming saturated.

REFERENCES

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2006). *New Literacies: Everyday practices and classroom learning.* Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.