

**Editorial: English curriculum in the current moment:
Tensions between policy and professionalism**

KAREN MONI

The University of Queensland

AMANDA HAERTLING THEIN

University of Iowa

SUE BRINDLEY

University of Cambridge, UK.

Knowledge as we know it in the academy is coming to an end ... [and this represents] a crisis arguably more serious than those of finance, organisation and structure. (Griffin, 1997, p. 3)

We are facing unprecedented assaults on teacher knowledge, professionalism and identity. The values of liberal humanism are being replaced by those of neo-liberalism. Teaching and teachers are being defined through “Standards”, and Education is reduced to a market place. “Knowledge” is defined by centralised curricula and enforced through government inspections. Teacher professionalism is defined by policy-makers; the good teacher is defined by compliance, not autonomy, and Ball’s “discourses of derision” are widespread. Teacher voice has been lost and replaced by teacher silence.

Of all subjects, English has perhaps been hardest hit. In teaching the skills of critique, in developing awareness of interpretation and meaning, in dealing with values and beliefs, English is dangerous. Worldwide, English teachers now face complex and restrictive policy environments. These environments seek to micro-manage the work of teaching and strip English teachers of their professionalism and autonomy.

In these circumstances, curriculum is managed by policy-makers, reinforced through swingeing assessment regimes, inspected by policy petit bourgeoisie, and uncontextualised league tables “inform” the wider society about school successes – and failures. Rather than leading change, advocating for the profession and celebrating English teaching, English educators and professional associations have spent precious resources and time defending their practices.

Following other leaders in English education (Brock, 2012; Doecke, Parr & Sawyer, 2011; Green, 2008; Luke, 2010, Smagorinsky, 2013 to name just a few), we believe that rather than allowing media and politics to position us, we as English educators must instead reclaim the agenda of teaching and learning in English, developing a professional discourse which allows us to speak with confident, convincing voices, drawing on research, on our empirical knowledge of the professional work of teachers who bring English to life through their interpretation and enactment of curriculum in their classrooms and communities.

In this deliberately provocative, themed edition of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, therefore, we asked English educators to “think differently” about how the teaching of English might be actively conceptualised and positioned by English teachers and educators in the face of current constraints, pressures, and mandates. Contributions to this edition include empirical research as well as reflective pieces

and essays that actively respond and speak back to this contested moment in the teaching of English. The authors resist reforms and policies that: “squeeze teachers into the tunnel vision of test scores, achievement targets and accountability (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 1). Instead, they offer diverse possibilities for re-visioning English in these contested times that take up Pope’s (2008) vision of a flexible and evolving English which rejects one-size-fits-all models of curriculum and teachers, that embraces plurality, acknowledges the diverse range of historical, geographic, social impacts on how English is constructed, and affirms the professionalism and capabilities of educators to lead the field. The contributions in this edition provide voices for the profession from different locations, contexts and sectors. Together they make a strong argument for professionalism of English educators and the importance of listening and acting on their expertise.

In the light of this, we have organized the articles in this edition by geographical location to provide a sense of how the tensions between policy and professionalism in English are being played out within our own jurisdictions.

AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

In Australia, the profession in general and English teaching in particular are being targeted through practices such as deficit-model teacher performance assessments and on deficit-model standardised testing of students. Add to this, the development of a contentious national curriculum for English, and it is no surprise that the current context of English has been likened to a war zone (Durrant, 2012; Snyder, 2008). The drain on teachers’ time and energy and the subsequent erosion of morale and professionalism have been intensified in recent months by federal political interference. With the imprimatur of a new federal government elected in September 2013, the Minister for Education has implemented two reviews into education, one focusing on questioning the merits of the new national curriculum, and a second on the quality of initial teacher education with a focus on teacher quality. Both reviews assume a deficit model of teachers. Reviews such as these and associated media and political claim and counter claim in contexts such as radio, newspapers and TV, where educators rarely have a voice, impact on systems, schools, teachers and ultimately on students since, rather than leading change, advocating for the profession and celebrating English teaching, English educators and professional associations have spent precious resources and time defending their practices.

The articles by Australian and New Zealand authors address three key policy initiatives in Australia. These are the national testing program of literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN), National Professional Standards for Teachers, and the content, and implications of implementing a national curriculum for English. Of these, the NAPLAN regime comes under initial scrutiny for the inequities of outcomes, discrimination against marginalised groups of students and its stifling effect on students’ experiences in English. The two papers that focus on issues arising from the national program in assessment of literacy and numeracy begin with a call to arms. O’Mara’s paper focuses on the tensions between national and international testing educational policy and school practices. She argues that the publication of NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website has been detrimental, pushing schools into “triage mode”, as they struggle to improve their scores. In speaking back to this practice,

O'Mara makes a case that international testing provides better markers for the performance of Australian students and that true gains in literacy are not made through triaging literacy through an emergency department, but through a long-term focus on school redesign.

The second paper is an important companion piece to O'Mara's paper through its focus on how this assessment regime further marginalises a current, significant, although marginalised group of students – ESL learners. Creagh focuses on the limitations of the statistical processes which form the architecture of the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test, that act to hide both the skills and needs of ESL students and to undermine the professional knowledge and work of ESL educators leading to inequities in funding and support for students with an ESL background.

The paper by Allard and Doecke continues the theme of the era of standards-based reforms as undermining English teachers through its exploration of the difficulties faced by early-career teachers in negotiating their burgeoning sense of who they are as teachers in the context of national professional standards (recently introduced by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL]) and NAPLAN, which construct them as helpless and unknowledgeable rather than as developing professionals.

The next two papers are linked by their focus on the recently introduced national curriculum in English in Australia, rejecting a one-size-fits all approach. The first by Exley and Chan examines how English teachers have been called on to share responsibility for the reconciliation agenda through mandates by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures are embedded in English. They consider the tensions between policy and practice when these external discourses are recontextualised into the discipline of English, arguing that the space to exert Reconciliatory agendas in the Australian Curriculum English is ambiguous, potentially marginalising Indigenous knowledges and creating further tensions between policy and practice for non-Indigenous teachers of English.

Phillips and Willis contrast current educational reform, policy and public discourses that emphasise standardisation in curricula and professional practice, with literacy practices that are fluid, interactive, multimodal, adaptive and collaborative, asking how English and literacy educators can negotiate these conflicting terrains? They propose a focus on living texts, which refer to experienced literacy events and encounters that offer meaning-making that is dynamic and interactive. Illustrated by two projects investigating the place of living texts in a community arts project and a multiliteracies project in a high school, the authors argue that working with living texts creates a purposeful, connected curriculum rich in community-relevant and culturally significant texts that enable teachers and students to challenge curriculum rigidity and standardisation.

The final paper in this group deals with a new space and opportunities within the context of the New Zealand/Aotearoa national curriculum to open up new possibilities for studies in sustainability. Drawing on work in the UK and New Zealand, Matthewman argues for the need to re-vision English in a “greener way” that addresses the environmental significance of English as a school subject. This exciting

new space has relevance beyond the context of New Zealand, where Matthewman argues her case, to Australia where sustainability defined as the on-going capacity of Earth to maintain all life is mandated as a priority across all curriculum areas. Using New Zealand as her worked example, the author argues for the presence of social, cultural, and environmental factors which offer the potential for eco-critical versions of English to emerge that have the potential to enrich teachers' professional practice. Her principled and theorized approach recognises the professional capabilities of teachers to teach about sustainability in English in ways that avoid tokenistic inclusion of sustainability issues.

THE UNITED STATES

The current policy climate in the United States echoes that of Australia and New Zealand in many ways, including in its push toward deficit-model teacher performance assessments and deficit-model standardised testing of students. However, as the US papers in this issue suggest, the dominant policy concern for US teachers and scholars in this moment is the adoption and implementation of a set of national standards – the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Developed by business leaders and testing companies, the CCSS were quickly adopted by most states, in large part because adoption allowed states to compete for federal education funding. Nearly as quickly as the standards were adopted, however, critiques of the standards were launched. As Hodge and Benko (this issue), explain, “As the CCSS have moved from an abstraction to a reality, a large number of parents, teachers, scholars, and policy-makers across the aisle have criticised the CCSS for multiple reasons, taking issue with aspects of the development and adoption process, the standards themselves, and/or their implementation.” Critiques have ranged from worries about how the CCSS limit local control over curriculum, to concerns about how the CCSS constrain teacher autonomy, cater to the financial interests of major textbook and testing companies, and limit and define what and how students should learn.

The papers from the US featured in this issue provide fresh perspectives on all of these concerns and others. Together, these papers encourage English educators and teachers to increase their conscious and critical awareness of the political and disciplinary origins of the CCSS, the ways in which textbooks and teacher resources structure and police implementation of the standards toward supporting particular ideological positions, and the ways in which political discourses affiliated with the standards serve to empower certain constituencies while disempowering others.

Brass's paper sets the stage for the five US papers featured in this issue by providing an historical overview of the disciplinary shifts in English education and literacy research that have led us to our current contested moment the English language arts. Brass argues that the shift toward multidisciplinary perspectives in research on literacy and English language arts has both opened up new possibilities and reinforced traditional divisions within the field. Tracing the pervasive and powerful neoliberal political agenda that guides current educational reform, Brass's paper illustrates how such reform can only be actively contested by the English/literacy community when we both understand the multidisciplinary perspectives that guide our work, and rethink the divisions these perspective sometimes reinforce.

The remaining US papers each shed critical light on several specific, ideological ways that the CCSS have been (and continue to be) interpreted and consumed by various constituencies.

Sulzer's essay offers an analysis of a "Common Core aligned" literature anthology that is frequently used in English classrooms across the US. Drawing on scholarship from the multidisciplinary field of Critical Youth Studies, Sulzer argues that this CCSS-aligned textbook constrains and minimises students' interpretive possibilities, and positions students as valuable only inasmuch as they progress toward college and career readiness – a phenomenon he refers to as the "basalisation of youth". In a similar vein, Schieble's paper is concerned with the CCSS list of exemplar texts—a list of suggestions for texts that might be taught in English classrooms—and the potential of this list to problematically regulate and narrow what counts as complex literature. Both Sulzer and Schieble offer suggestion for critical, student-centred, humanising approaches to text selection and literature learning in the English classroom that challenge the ways that the CCSS position and constrain student learning and literary interpretation.

Like Sulzer's paper, Hodge and Benko's paper centres on CCSS-aligned products—professional resources intended to help English teachers navigate the CCSS. Like Brass, Hodge and Benko place close attention to the often-competing philosophies that undergird scholarly agendas in English education. In their paper, Hodge and Benko suggest that although these philosophies are foundational to the construction of professional resources—resources that purport to give teachers agency in responding to the CCSS—they fail in transparently representing their stances and therefore risk contributing to a CCSS marketplace that disenfranchises teachers.

Johnson's paper also considers some of the ways that the dissemination and consumption of the CCSS has positioned English teachers as deficient and incapable of professional autonomy. Using methods from Critical Discourse Analysis, Johnson examines a model lesson given by one of the primary architects of the Common Core State Standards, David Coleman, and a group of English teachers' reactions to David Coleman's presentation. Through this analysis, Johnson illustrates how Coleman normalises discourses of standardisation that strip teachers of agency and knowledge, and explores how these discourses are both accepted and resisted by English teachers.

In common, Johnson's paper and Hodge and Benko's paper both argue for the critical need for English teachers to become active and critical consumers of the CCSS as it is disseminated and marketed. Both recommend that English educators have an important role in making the discourses and philosophies that undergird the CCSS, and standardisation in general, more transparent for English teachers.

Finally, and from the context of Argentina, Banegas reports on the politics of curriculum development, in this case a "unifying" initial English language teacher education curriculum in the province of Chubut. Writing as a participant, he reflects on emergent tensions in relation to how English should be represented, interculturality and how various fields of knowledge might be integrated in the new curriculum.

CONCLUSION

It is ironic that, in the UK at least, English emerged after the First World War as a subject charged with the purpose of cohesion—of bringing together a society fragmented by the devastating effects of four years of warfare. Its purpose was to ensure a sharing of values and beliefs which would enable society to reclaim a sense of cohesion. English is once again being given a role in shaping society—but it is a society where the values and beliefs are underpinned by an agenda of accountability and compliance. The “job” of English in this scenario is not to bring about empathy, or criticality, or independence of judgment, but rather a set of skills which will ensure that school-leavers become part an effective global workforce. The purpose is clear. Giroux’s discourse of possibility is swept away by the discourse of compliance, indeed complicity, as “good” English teachers come to be defined through and by adherence to “Standards”, whatever their form. In the triad of policy initiatives which invade education across our countries, that is, teacher standards, the national curriculum and literacy *as* English, and an assessment regime which reinforces policy versions of English, this Special Issue addresses key issues in the paucity of a model of English which neglects the human in favour of the economic.

It is difficult for all teachers working within a policy-determined environment, but perhaps especially those for whom the discourse of compliance has shaped their engagement with education and English from the beginning of their career, to understand that English is more than the acquisition of a pre-determined skill set. But if we apply Foucault’s principle of reversal, that is, to ask the “simple” question “What would happen if English were taken out of the curriculum?” we can see that, chillingly, only literacy would need to be returned to meet the neo-liberal agenda. Indeed, in the UK, the gradual excision of English literature as a student entitlement for all to an examination taught to an elite is a sad indictment of the value given to the human spirit. And what an impoverished world we stand to have as a result. A world of “relevance”, focused on the “practical”, accountable, measurable and—this is essential—controllable. Professionalism and teacher identity are reduced to sets of “tickable” characteristics. Creativity, strength of mind, ability to argue against, are devalued in the relentless quest to compete economically.

And yet we would argue that these are the very qualities that the best economies require. Paradoxically, policy-makers in education are bringing about a weakened economy by losing the critical cutting edge that students and teachers who have been asked to think differently could and should bring to economic success. Griffin’s warning is precisely about losing this kind of knowledge, knowledge which Durkheim referred to as “sacred”, an emotive term perhaps, but one which shows the values that we should be attaching to knowledge beyond the formulaic. And accompanying this knowledge has to be the discourse of emancipation, literally a procuring of equal rights in education. It is encouraging to see, therefore, in the articles we have collected together here, that English educators still see purpose to resistance.

But this is also an urgent call to look widely at education and English across countries and to be aware that English is coming under global control. Policy operates not just at domestic levels but at international, strategic levels. Our task as English educators is formidable. We must develop an internationally shared discourse and sets of practices which heed Griffin’s warning, and establish, through our subject, a version

of the self which resists definition by accountability. As Giroux tells us, we can only transform education through teachers, "... writ[ing], research[ing], and work[ing] with each other..." (1988, p. xxxiv). This Special Issue of *English Teaching Practice and Critique* is a contribution to that enterprise. We hope you find it stimulating and thought-provoking.

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