Australian Journal
of English Education

English in Australia Terms of Use

Australian Journal of English Education

AATE

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Guidelines for Contributors

The *Australian Journal of English Education* is the peer-reviewed national journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE).

The journal is committed to publishing material that is of importance to English educators. We welcome high quality teacher-oriented and scholarly submissions in any relevant field of English education, including literature and literacy education.

We are interested in submissions that reflect dilemmas, debates and concerns facing current contemporary English educators in Australia and elsewhere. Submissions may take the form of:

• A report on empirical research conducted with or by English teachers or students in classrooms

• A theorised discussion of English curriculum, or of the effects of policy on English teaching, or

• Practitioner inquiries, including reflective writing that takes a scholarly and methodical approach, that elaborates or illuminates aspects of the practices of English teachers.

Submissions should be explicitly linked to issues of English teaching, pedagogy or curriculum and demonstrate familiarity with current and pertinent scholarly literature.

Articles will be considered from any context where the learning and teaching of English is framed in ways that would engage and interest a secondary English teacher. Writers should take care to relate, early in their submission, the research context for the benefit of both Australian and international readers. The journal welcomes contributions that challenge traditional ways of thinking about English and that prompt readers to entertain new ways of conceptualising English curriculum and pedagogy

Contributors are encouraged to read previous issues of *English in Australia* to get a sense of the existing and ongoing scholarly conversations in our journal. Articles that share Higher Degree Research conducted by English teachers (e.g. Ph.D. and Ed.D. research findings) are welcome.

All articles are subject to double blind peer review by at least two reviewers. This means that the identity of the author is not divulged to the reviewers, nor are the reviewers' names revealed to the author.

Please refer to the following guidelines:

1. All articles should be submitted via Scholastica: https://ajee.scholasticahq.com/

2. Recommended length of articles for publication is between 4000 and 8000 words (including references).

3. Ensure your name is removed from the article, including from the document properties.

4. All submissions should be typed with double spacing in an easy to read font (e.g. Times New Roman or Calibri, 11–12 point) with a 2.5 cm margin on all sides.

5. Your submission should begin with an abstract of 100–150 words that succinctly summarises the research: context; design or methodology; and findings.

6. All references should conform to the American Psychological Association (APA) style. Please consult the *APA Publication Manual*, 7th edition, or any guide to APA referencing available through university library websites.

7. Submissions are expected to have a high standard of written English. Please ensure that you have carefully edited and proofread your submission. Articles submitted with a poor standard of written English, style problems or inaccurate/missing references will be returned to the author for revision before being considered for blind review.

8. Where possible, avoid footnotes. Usually it is possible to incorporate them into the text. Where they cannot be avoided, they should be numbered with a superscript and listed at the end of the article (endnotes).

9. It is the responsibility of authors to seek copyright clearance for any materials quoted, as required.

10. It is the responsibility of authors to ensure that all required ethics approvals and relevant permissions have been received prior to the submission of an article for review. Please ensure that a statement about ethical issues appears in articles that include data collected from or about humans, including any pertinent information about approvals or permissions.

11. It is expected that a clear statement about the implications of the research for English education policy and/or practice appears in either the Introduction or Conclusion section of your article.

12. Please include in Scholastica a separate file with your full name and institutional affiliation for publication, and a 50-word biographical description.

13. You retain copyright of materials published in the journal; *Australian Journal of English Education* holds first publication rights only. Authors retain the right to self-archive the final draft of their articles in their institution's eprint repository.

You can expect feedback from the reviewers and editor to help you shape your work effectively. Please feel free to contact the Editor or members of the Editorial team to discuss any contribution which you may be considering.

Although *Australian Journal of English Education* is predominantly a curriculum research and practice journal, occasionally poems and short texts of other genres relevant to the themes and readership of the journal are also published. Such pieces should be relevant to the lives and work of English teachers and students and be accompanied by a short (300–800 word) abstract or reflection. Please email the Editor regarding submissions of this type.

Editorial

Kelli McGraw

QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

This issue of the journal, as always, is striving to be read. As we restore our publication schedule and endeavour to welcome more international contributions under a new title, we are proud to share this range of significant works. The assemblage of papers in this issue is a fine collection to exemplify the scholarship we seek to promote in *Australian Journal of English Education*; philosophically rich, historically grounded, and often profiling teachers as researchers.

The opening paper by Jacqueline Manuel is a record of her Garth Boomer Memorial Address from the 2023 AATE/ALEA conference in Canberra. It was invigorating to be in the audience for that address as Manuel brought history to life, 'tracing a line back through time' to illuminate some of Boomer's many relevant lessons. Manuel revisits Boomer's 'essences' of powerful teaching: provocation; negotiation; demonstration; transformation; reflection; passion and desire; pragmatism; performance. In her address, she reminded us that 'when Boomer talked about becoming a powerful teacher, his starting point was always the self of the teacher'. It followed that articulating our philosophies of teaching was seen by Boomer as vital. Reminding us that 'history is now', this address offers anchors and beacons for teachers developing their identities in the face of contemporary authority and control.

Pressures placed on teachers in what Manuel refers to as our age of 'policy and performativity' are in turn the focus of Hugh Gundlach's paper, which investigates specific coping strategies among English teachers using the theoretical framework of 'job crafting'. His study shares how teachers are attempting to survive and adapt within school systems through task crafting, relationship crafting, and cognitive crafting to make their work more engaging and meaningful. Gundlach's work is interesting to read in relation to Manuel's keynote address, as well as Steven Kolber and Emma Enticott's paper, a metalogue about their lived teaching experience since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. Kolber and Enticott's paper reveals pressures on teachers to cope with work demands at an individual level. In their frank practitioner dialogue we are privy to individual coping mechanisms for dealing with post-COVID exhaustion and detail of what is damaging teachers' levels of 'confidence and joy'. All these papers will interest practitioners concerned with teacher shortages, identity, workload and wellbeing.

Student experience and critical literacy are other areas of interest that connect several relevant papers in this issue. Elizabeth Little and Kristine Moruzi's paper makes a compelling case for incorporating discussions of consent into the English curriculum. Their findings suggest young adult fantasy literature as providing a safe yet complex framework for students to explore the nuances of power, agency, and intimacy. It is vital that we cultivate practices for such critical engagement in English to happen in a safe and inclusive pedagogical space. To this end, Alice Elwell's paper offers a reimagining of the student role that empowers students as co-designers of the English curriculum. By striving to give students a more democratic voice, co-designing provided opportunities in Elwell's research for active citizenship, and assisted in incorporating a greater diversity of texts. In Alison Bedford and Cate Park-Ballay's paper on annotation for critical reading, we learn strategies from an action research project for explicitly teaching students annotation as a critical reading skill. All three papers consider the evolving role of English education as a space for student agency, critical engagement, and meaningful social inquiry. Taken together, they show how our choices in content, pedagogical approach, and explicit teaching objectives might constructively align with critical literacy as a common goal.

In another exploration of pedagogies for related-ness and connectedness, Andraya Stapp-Gaunt, Rosita Randle, Paul Collis and Jennifer Crawford share storying and yarning practices from their work in the Story Ground program in Canberra. Their paper shares the transformative process of attending to story in our teaching and learning, and of conversations on and including Country. They provide valuable insights on yarning and storying in Indigenous research methodologies, and on the role of protocols for yarning and maintaining cultural integrity. The authors ask – how might we shift our pedagogy and sense of interrelatedness if we conceptualised our stories as 'kin'?

Reflection on one's teaching philosophy and connection of learning theory to pedagogical action is a thread that connects all papers in this issue. In selecting a perspective from the past, another paper that combines learning theory with pragmatic ideas was chosen. Carrie Herbert's 'Drama and writing: The connections' (1982) insists on the valuable role of drama in developing the thinking, composing and writing processes of young authors. This perspective echoes findings presented in Manuel's keynote address, where students 'provoked' using drama activities to take up a mantle of the expert typically demonstrated greater engagement and comprehension, and wrote in a more academic register. Herbert's (1982) observations about how enactment of ideas in three dimensions makes thoughts more tangible, more ready for writing, remain relevant today. It seems a fitting example for this issue of the kind of pedagogy Boomer would have seen in the early 1980s and encouraged.

Reference

Carrie Herbert (1982). Drama and writing: The connections. *English in Australia*, no. 62, 45–49.

Garth Boomer Address

GARTH BOOMER MEMORIAL ADDRESS

'Beacons, anchors and liberators for hard times': Lasting lessons from Boomer's teaching wisdom

AATE/ALEA National Conference: Action 2 Impact: English and Literacy that Empowers
Canberra
July 2–5, 2023

Jacqueline Manuel, The University of Sydney

Introduction

I'm immensely honoured and humbled to be invited to give the Garth Boomer Memorial Address. I thank the conference organising committee for this opportunity. When I began teaching in 1991 – just down the road at Lake Tuggeranong College – I could never have imagined that I'd be here with you today, celebrating Garth Boomer's monumental legacy to us as English teachers.

In a conference address in 1989, Boomer referred to his audience as the 'advance guards' – the 10 percent of enlightened English teachers who 'go in search of new frontiers', prepared to move beyond the 'safe and stable ground' to 'anticipate discovery', to seek replenishment in the company of what he liked to call his fellow 'boundary riders' (Boomer, 1989, p. 4). There can be few more restorative moments in our professional lives than those that arise from gathering to share our stories and the infinite bequest of stories gifted by those who've come before us. To refresh our spirits, hearts and minds, if not our bodies. To be those 'ironic points of light' that Auden believed 'Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages' (Auden, in Mendelson, 1979, p. 48).

And we exchange our messages with the welcoming generosity of the original owners of this unceded land – the Ngunnawal people. I respectfully acknowledge elders past, present and emerging not only of this land, sky and waters but also of the land on which I work at the University of Sydney – the Gadigal Land of the Eora Nation.

At the entrance to our Faculty building is the inscription, 'Garabara'. It's from the Eora language, and it's another term for corroboree: a ceremony of storytelling, learning together, conveying and creating knowledge, all the while paying tribute to elders and the filaments of history that are forever woven into the fabric of our days.

Figure 1
Robert Andrew, Artist
(https://www.robotandrew.com/portfolio/2018-sydney-university-fass-building/)

It's apposite, then, that part of this conference – perhaps our version of Garabara – is dedicated to a mighty elder of our profession. One of the luminaries. Garth Boomer. A leader, learner, fierce advocate, provocateur, activist, agitator, charismatic orator, seeker and trail blazer of indefatigable tenacity and vision. A champion of what he called the 'eternal triangle of education: teachers, students and curriculum' (Boomer, 1978, p. 16). His close friend Peter McFarlane wrote that: '[o]ne of Garth's secrets as a learner and educator was that his growth always seemed to take place in conjunction with others'. 'I am a part of all that I have met', he used to say, quoting from Tennyson's 'Ulysses' – his favourite poem' (McFarlane, 1993, p. 18). And this dimension of Garth's way of being in the world, his profound belief in the relational nature of learning, epitomises – it seems to me – the intent of Garabara.

For those of us who entered the profession in the last decades of the twentieth century, it would have been impossible to avoid the influence of Garth Boomer, such was the reach and magnitude of his personality, his ideas and his impact. I count myself fortunate to have undertaken my teacher education during the heady days of the Boomer era. And they were heady days. Garth's was a regularly invoked presence during my early years as a teacher, since he and my husband Paul Brock were great friends and comrades (see Brock, 2013). I watched and learned as these warriors and their colleagues went into battle on the national stage – for teachers, students and English.

For those of you who began your career in more recent decades, this annual Memorial Address goes some way towards ensuring Boomer's legacy does not – to quote again from 'Ulysses' – 'rust unburnished' but continues to 'shine in use' (1842).

Boomer's continued relevance

My intention today's a simple one: to trace a line back through time. To shine some prismatic light on just a few of the many lessons from Boomer that I believe hold continued and even heightened relevance for us in 2023. To have a go at taking up what I read as his standing invitation to '[l]ook again. Re-discover … your teaching wisdom … the elegant, small bundle of things to take with you wherever you go; a set of beacons for the dark side of pedagogy; anchors in the storms of post-modernity; infinite generators and liberators for hard times' (Boomer, 1992, p. 45).

Even though my intention may appear to be simple,

I readily admit to feeling daunted by the attempt to do some justice to Boomer's colossal legacy: colossal not only in volume, but also in terms of the range and depth of his vision, his ideas and his values. As I re-read and reflected on his work, and that of scholars who've written about Boomer – especially Bill Green (see for example, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2013) – I was struck by the prescience of so much of his thinking, his provocations, and his razor-sharp analyses of the 'socio-political ties that bind' (Boomer, 1991, n.p.). As I was reaching back through the pages of Boomer's writing, his distinctive voice kept reaching forward, as if in conversation, urging us to revivify 'forgotten fundamentals' (1992, p. 45) – and he wasn't talking about spelling and punctuation! It was as if he were speaking to our moment, reminding me of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's insight: 'Let no one say the past is dead. The past is all about us and within' ('The Past', 1970, p. 99).

Yet Bill Green, along with others, has observed that '(w)e live and work in an age without history, real history – an age of policy and performativity' (2003, p. 14). That quest to understand our provenance – to re-engage with the great thinkers of the past – isn't just an indulgent exercise in nostalgia. Far from it. As Ian Reid (2003) states:

> [r]etrieving intellectual history is not an antiquarian pursuit. Anyone wanting to be a well -informed professional needs to understand certain continuities that link English curriculum discourses and practices with previous discourses and practices (p. 100).

Or as Brenton Doecke (2017) wrote more recently: '[c]onfronted by a neoliberal culture that is characterised by a loss of historical memory, we need to posit a history in which we might locate our ongoing practice as English teachers' (p. 236) as another source of collective disciplinary wisdom and professional agency. For

> A people without history
> Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
> Of timeless moments …
> History is now …
> (From 'Little Gidding', Four Quartets, by T.S. Eliot, 1943, p. 58)

Emancipation and agency versus authority and control

The great man and visionary, John Dixon often spoke of the historical yet enduring dialectic that we as

English teachers grapple with. At one end of the continuum is the ideal of English for emancipation and agency. At the other end, is the colonising hand of authority and control.

Our age of 'policy and performativity' is one of pronounced authority and control, whether it be through government intervention, regulatory frameworks, standardisation, or compliance and accountability regimes. And it's perhaps no coincidence that as authority has hardened, the voice, agency, trust in and presence of the teacher in policy decisions, curriculum reform and the public realm have diminished, as have the numbers choosing to enter the profession.

Here's a snapshot from history to illustrate curriculum discourses that actually celebrated English for emancipation and teacher agency. These are excerpts taken from two NSW English syllabus documents. The first is from 1953.

> It is recognised that the syllabus will be used by *many teachers, each of whom is an individual, instructing many equally individual pupils with widely different abilities and backgrounds.* Under these circumstances, teachers should regard it as *suggestive rather than prescriptive*, and should use it with due regard to the *varying needs of the pupils* (New South Wales Department of Education, 1953, p. 1) (Emphasis added).

The second is from 1971.

> In stating the aims and objectives of English in this way, *the syllabus does not prescribe, even by implication*, the details of selection and organisation of any English course. Within the broad framework of the syllabus, *those responsible for course-planning are free to use their professional judgment to develop their own courses according to the needs of their pupils* … (NSW Secondary Schools Board, 1971, p. 2) (Emphasis added).

There we have it. Enshrined in the rhetorical curriculum: freedom, professional judgment, *suggestion rather than prescription*, and a recognition of individuality and difference rather than standardisation. At times I wonder if we've become so inured to the prescriptive demands of the system – so worn down by the relentless pace and intensity of change – that we've forgotten (or indeed never experienced) what it was like when teachers were valued for their expertise, trusted to exercise their professional judgement, and respected as the adults in the room who actually don't require continuous monitoring and surveillance.

When I reflect on these historical documents and our lineage more broadly, I'm always reminded of the advice in Charles Olson's poem:

'These Days'
Whatever you have to say,
leave the roots on, let them dangle
And the dirt
Just to make clear
where they come from
(Olson, in Butterick, 1997, p. 74)

Boomer understood this. He spoke and wrote from a formidable intellectual grasp of the 'roots' and messy workings of schooling, of institutions and systems, of curriculum and pedagogies, and of the power and politics enabling or impeding self-determination. As a self-declared 'pragmatic radical' he never sugar-coated what he saw as the historically-constituted, symbolic and material architectures at the macro-level:

> … I have come somewhat painfully to understand that schools are not natural places … [they] are on as much about societies' business, the business of tribal initiation, as they … are about the business of individual children (1991, n.p.).

But this understanding didn't lead him down a path to despair. Quite the contrary. It emboldened him in his commitment to effect change through action, impact and empowerment – which happens to be our conference theme. He was certain that:

> [a]s infinitesimal as it may be, each individual action does change the balance of power. Each resistance or contrary impulse is a force, even if it is a new thought, because imminent in every thought is an action, a potential change of direction. Each thought shared and confirmed begins to multiply the potential.
>
>   Here lies much hope. Here breathes the sustenance and inspiration of all powerful teachers, individually and collectively. So long as teachers think new thoughts, schools will continue to change. Thought is energy. Thought resists entropy (1987, pp. 2–3).

Hope was Boomer's talisman. I'm confident he'd take our conference theme as not only a hope-filled call for empowering students through our theories of learning and pedagogical choices: he'd also provoke us to scrutinise how our thoughts and actions serve to strengthen or dilute our identity and our impact. He'd more than likely pose some uncomfortable questions:

- Are our thoughts, actions and curricula reproducing or disrupting existing power structures and knowledge systems?

- Are they operating to maintain or challenge cultural hegemony and social closure?
- How would you fare as a student in your class?

Yes, we inhabit a markedly different context to that traversed by Boomer. He lived in a pre-digital, pre-neo-liberal, pre-climate crisis, pre-smart phones and smart tvs, pre-EVs, pre-generative AI age, with no iPads, desktops, laptops, Zoom, Teams, social media, facial recognition, or astonishing advances in neuroscience. There was no such thing as the Internet, email, Google drive, or text messages. We thought a watch was doing a grand job if it just told us the time.

Some of us can recall those days. Others may find it hard to imagine how on earth we managed to live our lives and conduct our work when our tools of communication consisted of pen and paper, typewriters, tape recorders, VHS players, faxes, photocopy machines – I can even remember using Gestetners – overhead projectors and landline phones with a handset connected to a base by a curly cord. Somehow, we got by.

Three decades on, we now wrestle with vastly intensified workloads. We're deep into what many predicted would be a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention. An alarming proportion of our early-career colleagues – up to one third in some states – commence their professional lives in precarious employment on contracts or as casuals. With a crisis in workloads, teacher shortages and precarious employment, it's unsurprising that up to 50 percent of teachers leave the profession in their first five years (Sahlberg, 2022). We need to do better. Our survival as a profession depends on it. Deliberate or wilfully negligent policy decisions, or both over decades have altered so many of the contours of our professional lives. Since Boomer's time, inequities in the distribution of government funding to schools have shamefully ballooned. There was no NAPLAN. There was no ideologically-driven obsession with attributing god-like status to big-data. I could go on.

But as I alluded to earlier, our context is also crowded with debates, struggles and persistent questions that bear close resemblance to those of Boomer's time.

- What is English?
- Why does it matter?
- How do our students best learn in a world saturated with screens and technology?
- How do we ensure our actions have impact on entrenched disadvantage?
- How can we maintain our own passion, desire and energy as we strive to expand our students' thinking, fuel their curiosity and imagination, foster their autonomy and agency, and equip them to pursue their dreams?
- How do we become powerful teachers?

When Boomer talked about becoming a powerful teacher, his starting point was always the self of the teacher. Well before Parker Palmer popularised it, Boomer recognised that 'we teach who we are':

> [t]eachers teach most profoundly who they are at the core. The lasting lesson is the demonstration of the self as it handles its authority and those under its authority …' (1982, p. 123).
>
> … We act from our present constructs for better or for worse … To know ourselves we need to know how our world has made us who we are. The process of becoming powerful is one of progressive illumination and criticism of the shadowy aspects of ourselves and the world about us … We are forever becoming. This is called learning (1987, p. 7).

He recognised that 'teachers in their classrooms are already powerful people who have the capacity, with a few words or the assignation of a mark, to decide a student's future or at least to influence it' (1987, p. 3).

That's why he implored us to articulate our learning theory – our philosophy of teaching. For example, in his closing address to the 1991 Australian Reading Association conference in Adelaide, he reflected:

> [w]e are in hard times, when money and imagination is short; patience must be long. In order to make struggle and survival possible, we need to make explicit to ourselves and others (in so far as we can) the way the world is wagging. It's no good trying to seal hermetically the classroom lecture door, the society contaminates because we carry it with us. The un-worldly [English] literacy teacher is a sitting duck – a lamb to the slaughter, an impossible dreamer.
>
> On the other hand, don't lose the energy, the new thoughts, the emerging imaginings that have been aroused. With nous and with support, with clear heads and cunning strategy, much is possible (1991, n.p.).

He believed in the need to be 'worldly': to come to grips with, in his words, 'how the world works, how political power operates … how institutions are shaped … how culture is formed and transformed' (Boomer, 1987, p. 9); to understand the complex factors, forces and 'ingrained educational mythologies' that exert influence over how and what we teach and

how students learn; to be 'highly aware of constraints and *cul de sacs* while equally alert to the opportunities to make gains in transforming classrooms, schools and institutions' (Boomer, 1992, p. 57); and to value 'together' over 'alone' (Boomer, 1987, p. 7).

In 1978 Boomer described these complex factors and forces as 'an almost self-perpetuating chain of subjections' (p. 18), tethering teachers and students to limiting ways of being, doing and knowing. This chain of subjections might be broken, he suggested, by naming the constraints and mythologies operating at all levels, taking a 'constructively irreverent stance towards them' (p. 18) and then, importantly, letting students in on the game.

More than this: it was Boomer's conviction that being worldly would mean empowering students through modelling and enacting *democratic* values and recalibrating the power relations in our own classrooms (1987, 1988, 1999). He advocated that in planning for learning and teaching, we must always begin by knowing our students: 'imagining the thoughts and feelings of one who is coming to this territory for the first time' (1992, p. 49). Once imagined, we're better positioned to make ethically-informed pedagogical decisions that enable student choice, that build their agency and productive collaboration, and that validate the experiential and language capital that each student carries, just like their history, into our schools every day.

By being worldly, according to Boomer, we can be liberated from what he termed 'theoretical incarceration' and 'cultification' (Wildash, 2014, n.p.) – the tendency to being seduced by fads, formulae, the latest gurus and promises of quick fixes. By being worldly, we're more equipped to rise through purposeful action, to speak up and to speak back to the myths and narratives of declining standards, the erosion of trust in teachers, the marginalisation of grounded educational expertise, the pincer grip of standardised testing and the ubiquitous ideology of performativity (Ball, 2003, p. 216).

It was three decades ago when Boomer laid out what he held to be the 'essences' of powerful teaching – 'distillations from a lifetime of thinking about teaching and learning, each essence going to the core. Together they amount to a potent educational elixir' (Boomer, 1993, p. 5).

- Provocation
- Negotiation
- Demonstration
- Transformation
- Reflection
- Passion and desire
- Pragmatism
- Performance

And here's the thing. Not a single one of these 'essences' relies on digital technology. They form what could be described as a transtemporal wellspring for theory into practice, for 'action to impact'. Each is dependent on the other. Each is informed by a coherent learning theory. Each emanates from the self of the teacher. But when talking about essences, Boomer wasn't essentialising: rather, he was seeking to give shape to the convergence of thought, language and experience, reminiscent of Dewey's and later Dixon's and others' educational philosophy of active, exploratory learning and teaching.

The essences are worth revisiting. If you haven't, I'd recommend that you read Boomer's paper where he details these: 'How to make a teacher' (*English Education*, 1993, 25[1], pp. 3–18). It's both informative and entertaining. He leaves the reader in no doubt about his beliefs. What I'd like to do is touch on some of the essences and offer examples of how these may translate into powerful teaching: some beacons and anchors for our times.

Essence 1: Provocation

You may be familiar with the concept of productive discomfort, liminality (Turner, 1964; Van Gennep, 1977), Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), cognitive dissonance, or Keats's Negative Capability (n.d.). Boomer's key argument is that learning (whether as young people or adults) can't occur until and unless the learner is provoked: unsettled to move beyond their known, comfortable realm to tackle ideas, situations, texts or materials that will challenge and perturb them. If we come to accept discomfort and disturbance as a condition for learning, then new understandings, new ways of seeing, knowing and being can emerge. Rather than me trying to summarise, here's what Boomer had to say about the centrality of provocation in teaching and learning.

> Invocation and injunction are sterile pedagogical ploys, even when dressed up with motivation — by which I mean the teaching equivalent of crushing aspirin in honey to make it palatable or putting on a song and dance show to gain attention. This is a sad vaudeville of teaching; a spurious aspiration to titillate and seduce the relatively immune, partially jaundiced and already

overstimulated consumers of the manic media. Hard work and self- defeating. The more you do it, the more they want it and the more novel the motivation needs to be.

The key to learning is disequilibrium. You can motivate till the cows come home but no learning of any substance will occur unless the student becomes mentally unsettled. Learning is the movement from unbalance towards a point of balance …

… The art of teaching is to provoke disequilibrium, to produce or induce a state of puzzlement, disquiet or disease in the areas where the teacher is wanting learning to take place.

It is a principle of brain activity that once unsettled, the brain will seek to relieve tension by finding a new point of settlement. Once the brain is in tension in this way, the learner is intending.

Intention is the key to powerful learning. The teacher has the role of producing or arranging for interruption, disturbance, and a kind of itchiness. So, essence one — Provocation (1993, pp. 5–6).

You may already have a sense of that unmistakable Boomer voice and readiness to tell it as he saw it. You may also be doing a quick mental search for the pedagogical moments when you provoked your students to go boundary riding. Or when you yourself were provoked into strange frontiers. Can I share an example of provocation that I've often adapted in my own teaching? It comes from a research study conducted by Graham Boardman and my friend and colleague, John Hughes (1994).

They were interested in the utility of Dorothy Heathcote's 'Mantle of the Expert' (Heathcote & Bolton, 1994) as pedagogical provocation to support students' engagement with and understanding of poetry. We know that approaches to teaching poetry can be soulless, mechanical and alienating, resulting in students consistently rating the study of poetry as their least preferred activity in English (Manuel & Marchbank, 2022). We also know that drama activities are often inherently provocative.

For their study, Boardman and Hughes chose 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning – a poem often selected for study in senior English. They worked with 42 Year 11 students, divided into three groups of 14. They considered gender and language background in their groupings. In Group A, the fourteen students were given a copy of the poem. They then listened to a recording of the poem and followed the text.

Copies of the poem were then removed, and students responded to questions. There was no discussion. Group B was divided into three sub-groups of four, five, and five. Each was given a predictive set of quotes from the poem to discuss *before* listening to a recording of the whole poem. Copies of the poem were removed and each student was asked to respond to questions. Group C engaged in a drama activity – the Mantle or Enactment of the Expert. The students and the teacher engaged in role-play to become 'experts' in a particular field – to wear and enact a mantle.

Group C students were asked if they knew of any famous universities. They came up with: Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge. The teacher then suggested that the students become expert groups of English professors from each university: five students became professors at Oxford, five at Cambridge, and four at Harvard. Their first task was to draw a map of their university and locate the English Department and their offices. After several more role-play activities, the student professors were given extracts from the poem but told the whole poem had apparently been lost. They were asked to predict what the poem may be about, in role.

Here are the results. Group A had the briefest responses. Two or three lines, at most. Many of these students were negative in their responses and revealed that the text was quite meaningless for them. They wrote for example:

'I think that the poem is about a painting of a dog, a show dog perhaps … "the last Duchess" as the poem is called was probably either the dog's name or they were just referring to how lovely the dog was …' (Boardman & Hughes, 1994, p. 44).

Students in Group B demonstrated a higher level of engagement with the text. They wrote between half to one page but many miscued their responses.

'I think that the man who painted his last Duchess is commenting on how he produced this painting …' (Boardman & Hughes, 1994, p. 44).

The students in Group C demonstrated the strongest engagement with and comprehension of the poem. A majority wrote a page or more of comments and were confident about their own ability to make meaning. They also tended to write in a more academic register which, it's hypothesised, was a result of their assumed high-status role. For example:

'The story is about a marriage. The husband is still alive and he is looking at a painting on the wall, telling his friend about his life-time experiences with his wife …' (Boardman & Hughes, 1994, p. 44).

What's clear from this study is that the students who were 'provoked' to project beyond their known world, to use their imagination, to conjure and then inhabit a role, in active collaboration with their peers, were more able to engage with and make meaning from the text.

Now you may have noticed several principles at work here. I'll highlight just a few. First, in addition to high expectations, there's a level of trust in the students to make decisions, use their judgment, collaborate, and take part in the activities with a degree of responsibility and agency. Second, the typical power dynamic between the student and the teacher, and the text and the student was disrupted. By that I mean the text was not positioned from the outset as the transcendent artefact to which the reader must reverentially defer. The students were positioned as the experts, with an embodied sense of some authority over the fragments of text. Third, the students' knowledge and experience were harnessed to build connections between their familiar world and the unfamiliar world of the text in order to construct meaning. They were invited to mobilise their capital. Or as James Gee (1996) describes it – their 'Primary Discourses': the store of language, knowledge and ways of being accrued through their lived experience, memories, and imagination. These Primary Discourses are a critical foundation for developing students' 'Secondary Discourses' – the raft of specialist discourses, knowledge and skills associated with schooling that must be taught and learned. Building connections between Primary and Secondary Discourses is especially important for students whose familiar world may not be as expansive as that of more privileged others.

And fourth, they got to play. It was an adventure and it was FUN.

This approach to textual study can be adapted in an endless variety of ways: students can become 'experts' in roles that are not necessary the orthodox, mainstream and privileged ones. The principles evident here go to the heart of a pedagogy of 'action for impact' and empowerment, as does Boomer's second essence – negotiation.

Essence 2: Negotiation
Negotiation was Boomer's signature theme – the centre of gravity for so much of his work. At its core,

negotiation is the expression of democratic values and ethical intentions in teaching and learning, curriculum and power relations. He regarded negotiation as:

the hardest essence of all to attain, but once established in the teaching regime, an amazingly fertile context for good learning. How can students work with you, he asked, to learn deliberately in the area in which you'd like them to learn unless you deliberately and explicitly state what's on your agenda, what's not negotiable and where there's room for variation? (1993, p. 7).

He portrayed the negotiating teacher as one who is:

committed to changing the balance of power in the classroom and to establishing a climate and relationship in which student dissent, difference and preference is heard and to some extent accommodated and mobilised. This means that the teacher boldly accepts the need to become vulnerable, divesting her or himself of Godlike pretentions to truth and surrendering the certainties of pre-figured programming.

It does not mean capitulation to a laissez faire regime of "do-what-you-like"; nor does it mean an abrogation of the mandate to teach, but it does require the capacity to be gently irreverent about one's own status and open to the contributions and critique of the relatively less powerful. The negotiating teacher reaches new plateaux of self-awareness and meta-capability in relation to the teaching-learning act and its socio-political context (1993, pp. 7–8).

In practice, we have opportunities to alter the balance of power in our classrooms through negotiation in a multitude of ways. Let me give some simple examples from my own research. For a long time, I've been interested in learning more from secondary students about their reading practices and preferences. Early on in this research, it became evident that there was a significant correlation between the scope for student choice in reading in English and students' attitudes to, engagement with and accomplishment as readers. We know that choice is a critical factor in the motivation to read (Dickenson, 2014; Manuel, 2012; Thomson, 1998; Whitehead et al., 1977) and many young people have clear preferences when it comes to what and how they read:

These findings were replicated in a more recent study I conducted with Thom Marchbank last year. Here are student responses to their **most** and **least** preferred activities in English.

This evidence isn't suggesting that we don't

Students' most and least preferred reading experiences

Key finding

Students were asked to rank their preferences for the experiences (and pedagogy) of reading that commonly occur in their English classrooms.

Key finding

Reading Activity in Class*	Most preferred per cent	Least preferred per cent
Reading stories selected by student	41.0	5.5
Teacher reading out aloud	35.5	14.0
Silent reading of self-selected material	26.5	5.5
Acting out plays or scenes	22.5	19.0
Reading magazines	18.0	4.5
Reading plays out aloud in class	27.0	22.0
Reading stories selected by teacher	21.0	19.5
Reading out aloud around class	5.5	46.5
Reading poetry selected by teacher	1.5	47.0

* Students were able to indicate more than one 'most preferred' activity.

TEENAGERS & READING

Table I. (Manuel, 2012)
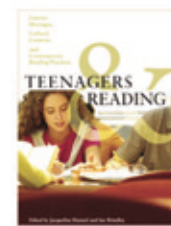
continue to make informed decisions about what, why and how our students should read. Of course we should and we must. What it is sharply highlighting is the importance of careful, informed text selection and the need to create room for negotiation and student choice in the design of our reading programs. At the simplest level, integrating and normalising student choice requires a balance of teacher-selected materials; teacher-student negotiated materials; student-student negotiated materials; and student self-selected materials. This is what negotiation for powerful teaching and learning looks like – and I'm thinking particularly of Years 7–10. It is about opening windows for student choice, agency, responsibility and collaboration.

For more on negotiation, I'd recommend you explore Amanda McGraw and Mary Mason's recent research on reading and writing (2022). It offers us compelling insights into students' perspectives on English and the extent to which pedagogies of authority and control undermine and even efface student voice, confidence and ultimately, their achievement as readers and writers. Which leads into Boomer's third essence – Demonstration.

Essence 3: Demonstration

A lasting message from my teacher education days was that we should never expect our students to do what we are not prepared to do ourselves. For example, one of Ken Watson's '10 Don'ts of Teaching Literature' (1983) is:

DON'T demand chapter-by-chapter summaries – but if you *do*, experience the boredom yourself by writing with the class (p. 14).

As teachers, we model, embody and enact our expertise and values through demonstration. Boomer framed it in this way:

Since teaching is a demonstration of the self, it is a generous invitation to students to observe how the teacher thinks, feels, understands, solves and acts.

Too many teachers, out of habit or anxiousness, or pure love of hogging the limelight, teach pre-maturely at the front end of the curriculum; pre-empting, revealing, anticipating and explaining too early. If this is done before the students have become interested (before they've been provoked, disturbed and made uneasy) then there is a strong likelihood that the teaching will be mere words on the wind; incantations over the uninvolved or disinclined. Too often in English teaching the emperors or empresses are wearing very scanty clothing indeed (1993, p. 5).

He went on to give the example of teaching writing, where we often require students to write and submit an essay for assessment, but rarely, according to Boomer, do we share with students 'how we write an essay which would get an "A", demonstrating underlying thinking, showing how the editing process works and revealing aspects of the aesthetics and critique which come into play when one takes on the role of reader over one's own shoulder' (1992, p. 51).

Writing *with* our students, sharing our writing process and products, cognitive, affective and practical, being up-front about the struggles and the strategies we rely on to write – this kind of demonstration amounts to 'action for impact' and empowerment, and the essence of demonstration is just as necessary when

Table 2. (Manuel & Marchbank, 2022)

Option	% (n=365)
Being creative	*55.03%*
Reading material I have chosen myself	*53.22%*
Small group work	*49.83%*
Group discussions	*45.89%*
Creative writing	*40.48%*
Studying films	*37.76%*
Discussion of ideas and themes relevant to my life	*35.15%*
Reading novels	*34.69%*
Performing plays and scripts	*34.65%*
Individual work	*32.21%*
Writing short stories	*32.11%*
Activities that are not assessed	*32.11%*
Using the Library	*31.21%*
Debating	*30.61%*
Studying drama and plays	*27.57%*
Reading non-fiction	*25.43%*
Writing plays and scripts	*23.41%*
Making mulitmodal / film texts	*22.71%*
Studying media	*22.22%*
Writing poetry	*16.50%*
Writing essays	*13.85%*
Reading poetry	*12.59%*
Activities that are assessed	*8.44%*
Reading material chosen by the teacher	*6.67%*

teaching reading.

Essence 4: Transformation

We're pretty good at transformation as part of our pedagogy. We understand that, in Boomer's words, 'every time we transform something we know from one medium to another, we intensify our understanding and our skills' (1992, p. 52). He advocated for 'multiple transformations' in relation to what has been set for study, especially in the medium of language. He argued, though, that 'we often neglect to consider other culturally significant media and techniques' including graphic representation, model making, filming, illustrating, making music or harnessing non-language-based forms (1993, p. 5).

I'd like to offer an example of transformation in one of those non-language-based forms. A superb English teacher and friend, Nici Papasedero as well as the student who created this transformation, have given me permission to share with you the work of one of her students. As part of their study of *Hamlet* in

Year 12, students were asked to respond creatively to a 'key scene' in the play, choosing a form to represent their interpretation such as an artwork, a poem, or an interview with a character. They were then asked to reflect on and explain the transformation.

Here's the response from one student.

$$\int_{\frac{\pi}{6}}^{\frac{\pi}{3}} (\sin\Omega - \alpha)\,d\Omega$$

$$= \left[-\cos\Omega - \alpha\Omega\right]_{\frac{\pi}{6}}^{\frac{\pi}{3}}$$

$$= \left(-\cos\frac{\pi}{3} - \frac{\alpha\pi}{3}\right) - \left(-\cos\frac{\pi}{6} - \frac{\alpha\pi}{6}\right)$$

$$= -\frac{1}{2} - \frac{\alpha\pi}{3} + \frac{\sqrt{3}}{2} + \frac{\alpha\pi}{6}$$

$$= \frac{-3 - \alpha\pi + 3\sqrt{3}}{6}$$

$$= \frac{\sqrt{3}-1}{2} - \frac{\alpha\pi}{6}$$

Explanation of the mathematical formula for a key scene in Shakespeare's Hamlet, *Advanced English*

The alpha, α, the variable of the equation symbolises what is individual to each person. It is also symbolic of the limits of the human condition. The sine curve is indicative of all shared human experience, which encompasses all the positives and negatives of life, as the sine curve fluctuates between positive and negative values …

The units are in radians, a measurement derived from the circumference of a circle, alluding to the cyclical nature of the persistent human condition. Also, the radians are symbolic of one's life span as it places a limit upon the area you are finding. Integration, a form of calculus, is symbolic of Hamlet's highly analytical mind that is "thinking too precisely on th' event" (Act 4, Scene iv) … The answer, mathematically, is the area bound by the sine curve and the line alpha. Symbolically it is what's left of a person's life after the limits of their choices have been placed upon them … The resultant is an irrational number, mirroring the imperfect nature of all existence … as reflected in the irresolution at the ending of *Hamlet*.

This is a stunning example of provocation, negotiation and transformation, coalescing. With this task, the teacher reconfigured the power relations, released the students to exercise agency by marshalling their passions, expertise, intellect, creativity and imagination to generate new ways of knowing. To apply their judgment. To push beyond the perimeters of orthodoxy. I think you'd agree that the student arrived at a unique interpretation of the play. This would not have been possible without the teacher's willingness to court risk through boundary pedagogy and provoke her students to venture into uncharted terrain. They returned with unexpected discoveries and outcomes. When we intentionally curate the conditions, rich, transformative learning can arise.

As I mentioned earlier, I don't have the space to explore all of Boomer's essences. But I'd like to make a few observations about passion and desire – an essence that's perhaps the most at risk under the weight of excessive labour and the exhaustion that many teachers contend with. Each year I welcome a new group of aspiring English teachers into the Master of Teaching program at the University of Sydney. I've been doing so for more than 23 years now. Around one third, year on year, come to teaching from another career having been, for example, lawyers, corporate managers, journalists, and one year, a professional clown. Each year, I begin by asking what motivates them to become an English teacher.

For more than 23 years, the responses have remained remarkably consistent, not only from my students, but also from those reported on in international studies (Heinz, 2015). People continue to be drawn to teach English for intrinsic reasons and because of that increasingly rare motivation of altruism:

- A love of /passion for the subject and literature
- A desire to work with young people to make a difference to their lives
- A commitment to social justice and equality

What I perceive here is emblematic of hope and possibility: a reflection of the optimistic value-seeking spirit that characterises those who choose to teach, especially English. When I invite pre-service teachers to reflect on their ideations of teaching they typically invoke Boomer's essence of 'passion and desire', along with 'love' and 'dreams' (Manuel & Dutton, 2022). They often enter Initial Teacher Education carrying an internalised set of 'epistemic assumptions' (Reid, 1996, p. 32) about the purpose and significance of English in their own lives and its anticipated impact on the

selfhood and life chances of the students they'll teach. But their initial altruism and idealism tend not to have been mediated by a 'worldly' lens.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges then for those of us who work with beginning teachers is to tread softly as we provoke them to problematise and test these initial assumptions and beliefs. To support them to recognise cognitive dissonance and disequilibrium as necessary conditions for their own and their students' learning and growth.

Through arts-based approaches, such as narratives, poetry and the use of metaphors they give form to their developing sense of self as a teacher. Their passion and altruism serve as co-ordinates to chart a course through 'restless waters' of regulation and authority, to guide them back to the 'still points' (Eliot, 1943) where meaning, purpose, and wisdom dwell. They strive to build a professional identity that integrates altruism and the pragmatism of being 'worldly'. In time, they also come to understand the affordances of what my brilliant friend and colleague, Professor Liam Semler, conceptualises as 'ardenspaces': 'like Shakespeare's Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* they're spaces which seems to liberate, empower and unexpectedly transform various characters who seek refuge there' (Semler, 2016, p. 3). These ardenspaces – for us, our classrooms – can be imagined as 'exile' spaces that 'temporarily sit outside or alongside regular institutional domains … beyond the overly systematised 'court' of schooling, as harbours of possibility (Semler, 2016, pp. 3–6). Semler hastens to add that this doesn't equate to 'a reckless plunge into chaos, but rather a thoughtful pursuit of dynamic educational spaces that can rejuvenate, inspire and productively upset the status quo' (2016, pp. 3–6).

To illustrate this process of identity formation, in the ardenspace of our university classroom, I want to share a poem by a pre-service teacher that captures her idealism, altruism, passion and desire, but is tempered by questioning and an acceptance of productive disequilibrium and uncertainty.

'The English teacher I'd like to be …'

Am I a lighthouse guiding ships to shore,
Standing strong and firm through sunsets and sunrises,
Though buffeted by winds and waves yet unwavering,
A constant source of strength in a sea of uncertainty?

Or am I like the reflective surface of an Alpine lake?
Calmly and quietly capturing the beauty of mountain
   peaks?

Perhaps the lake surges downwards into a valley of green
  trees,
Watering the way westward into the setting sun?

What if I were a young tree with roots reaching down,
  leaves appearing,
Refracting the golden light of the morning sun?
Then at sunset I would stand in silhouette to survey the
  light
Which, giving me life, had caused others to grow.
Yet I was what I have been,
I am what I am,
And I will be what I am about to be …
(Pre-service teacher, USYD, 2018)

By the way, you may have noticed some echoes here of Tennyson's 'Ulysses' in its metaphors of possibility, voyaging and discovery:

… Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars …
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
(From 'Ulysses' by Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1842)

And if you did, you may also have glimpsed the spirit of Boomer: his lessons for the ages, organically woven through the discourse and aspirations of an English teacher, generations on.

'History is now'.

So in the face of authority and control, let's shore up the filaments of that history as our ballast. Trust in our teaching selves. Hold fast to hope and optimism, just as Boomer did. Create our ardenspaces for action, impact and empowerment. Continue to value together over alone. And restore to collective consciousness the 'beacons, anchors and liberators' from the bold pathfinders on whose shoulders we stand. Let's ensure 'the dust on antique time does not lie unswept' (Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*), so that, in the words of my favourite poet, Judith Wright, 'what is within becomes what is around' (1946, p. 141).

In closing, I'd like to give the last word to my grand-daughter, Matilda. She's only 5 years old. She's in Kindergarten at Roselea Public School, and with her wonderful teacher, Miss Raj, she's thriving. I asked her to talk about what she thinks makes a good teacher. Given I've spent some time here exploring Boomer's views, I wanted to include her voice from the present. She wasn't coached. She was asked to talk about 'what makes a great teacher'. Her ideas are her own. (This is a transcribed excerpt from a video played during the presentation).

Good morning, everyone. My name is Matilda and I'm going to be saying what makes a good teacher. What makes a good teacher is to be interested in your students and what they want to do, and do exciting things for your students. Make it fun and happy and not boring for students. Make sure you do things that your students like and be caring and 'loveful'. Also, try your best to be calm … let your students decide what they want to do in their activities. I most enjoy doing rotations. You go in rotation around my classroom and you get to do fun activities … The best way to help students learn is to go slowly, not to go too fast so the students can understand you and not to go too fast on the board. What makes a good teacher is being happy.

Matilda never got to meet her Grandpa Paul. But there's no doubt his passion for life, learning – and talking – lives on in her. When I reflect on the legacy of Paul, of Garth and of so many others who have come before us, I envision Matilda's and every young person's present and future in the steadfast and knowing hands of our splendid profession. And for that gift, I'm indebted to our elders and to each of you here today.

Thank you.

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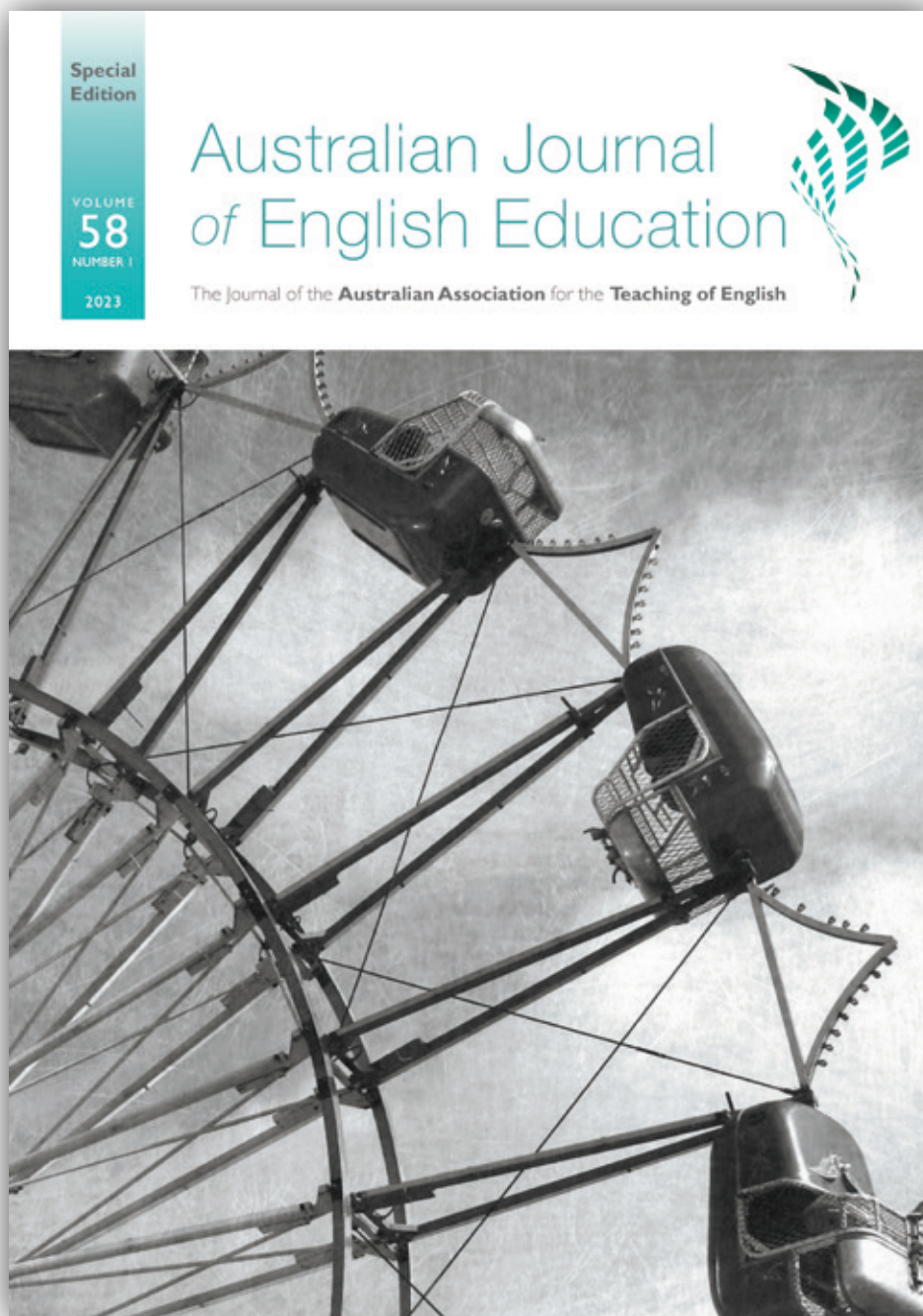
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Sustaining English Teachers in their Work: The Role of Job Crafting

Hugh A.D. Gundlach, The University of Melbourne

Abstract: Australia is currently experiencing a teacher shortage due to a rise in teacher turnover. Common causes of teacher turnover include job dissatisfaction, stress and workload. Keeping teachers in schools and the profession and supporting them to perform well is critical to maintaining a high standard of expertise in Australian classrooms. This study therefore investigated the individual coping initiatives used by English teachers to support their retention in schools and in the profession. An online survey gathered quantitative and qualitative data from a sample of 304 current and former Australian secondary English teachers about the initiatives that currently or previously sustained them in their work and helped them to feel successful. 'Job crafting' is a framework for techniques employees use to make their work more engaging and meaningful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and coding of participant responses to the 'task crafting', 'relationship crafting' and 'cognitive crafting' categories in Slemp and Vella-Brodrick's (2013) Job Crafting Questionnaire found that the English teachers in this sample predominantly used task crafting (by adding more duties to their roles) and relationship crafting (by developing connections with colleagues and students) to enable themselves to feel successful and maintain their wellbeing. Cognitive crafting was less common, but appeared in the way the teachers set mental boundaries to achieve work-life balance. The findings have implications for teacher wellbeing, job satisfaction and retention, as well as teacher job design, human resource management, education policy and job crafting theory.

Introduction

In Australia, English teachers face a heavy workload that can impact their wellbeing and motivation in the long term (Manuel et al., 2019). Australia is also experiencing a teacher shortage, suspected by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to be a product of a reduction in the supply of teaching graduates and an increase in the turnover of current teachers (Education Services Australia, 2021). Without a stable workforce of committed, energetic, high-impact and resilient teachers, Australian students will not have effective instruction or continuity in their learning (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Fenech et al., 2021).

Teachers hold specialist knowledge of not only their subject area, but also their students, schools, curriculums, colleagues and students' parents (Brown & Wynn, 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Manuel & Hughes, 2006). Excessive teacher turnover can result in negative outcomes including schools suffering shortfalls in institutional knowledge, disadvantages to student learning, larger class sizes and the replacement of teachers with inexperienced or less qualified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2019; Guin, 2004; Kini & Podolsky, 2016; Menzies, 2023; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sutcher et al., 2019).

Teacher turnover has been attributed to issues such as job dissatisfaction (Heikonen et al., 2016; Kristensen & Westergaard-Nielsen, 2004; Stockard & Lehman, 2004), negative wellbeing (Schaefer et al., 2012), excessive workloads (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015) and stress (Allen et al., 2005; McInerney et al., 2018). Teacher retention has been attributed to job satisfaction, positive wellbeing, manageable workload and an ability

to cope with stress (Gundlach, 2022; Mearns & Cain, 2003; Richardson et al., 2013; Sharplin et al., 2011).

Emerging from the field of wellbeing science is a form of workplace coping strategy called job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting is concerned with how employees proactively shape and influence their work to make it more meaningful and satisfying, and can take the forms of: *task crafting*, or adding to, modifying or removing tasks from one's job; *relationship crafting*, or making adjustments to who one works with and how one interacts with people; and *cognitive crafting*, or modifying the way one thinks about one's job (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

As job crafting can be a way to increase job satisfaction, promote positive wellbeing and enhance performance, this study aims to uncover which job crafting activities English teachers engage in and how they may contribute to retention in schools and the profession. An online survey comprising open-ended unprompted questions and closed multiple choice questions asked a sample of more than 900 current and former K–12 teachers about their job crafting activities and past decisions about whether to leave or stay in their schools and the teaching profession. The responses from a sub-sample of 304 current and former secondary English teachers were coded to the three types of job crafting using a fifteen-item framework adapted from Slemp and Vella-Brodrick's (2013) Job Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ). The findings from the English teacher sub-sample have implications for job design and school leadership, human resource policy-making, education policy-making, job crafting theory and teacher turnover research.

Literature review

There is currently a teacher shortage in Australia, which can be partially attributed to supply but is predominantly ascribed to high turnover/low retention (Element 1, Figure 1) (Department of Education, 2022; Clare, 2022). The Australian government and national independent bodies such as AITSL, the Australian Council for Educational Research and the Grattan Institute consider excessive turnover of pre-retirement age teachers to be as significant as early-career teacher attrition, if not more so (AITSL, 2016; Education Services Australia, 2021; Department of Education, 2022; Hunter, 2022; Weldon, 2018). As not all turnover or retention is voluntary on the part of the employee (Griffeth & Hom, 2001), it is prudent to make distinctions about the employee's degree of control

over the career decision to leave or stay, and their accompanying motivation state (Elements 2 & 9, Figure 1). However, while efforts to track turnover nationally have begun (Education Services Australia, 2021), there is still a lack of distinction between the migration of teachers from one school to another and attrition from the profession completely as components of turnover figures (Elements 3 & 4, Figure 1) (Gundlach, 2022).

Voluntary career decisions are often related to job satisfaction, or an individual's appraisal of their work role as measured against their needs, values and expectations from both cognitive and affective perspectives (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Gundlach, 2022; McInerney et al., 2018; McJames et al., 2023; Price & Bluedorn, 1980; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). This study makes use of Hom et al.'s (2012) 'proximal withdrawal states' framework, which includes four classifications of employees: 'reluctant leavers', 'enthusiastic leavers', 'reluctant stayers' and 'enthusiastic stayers' (Element 9, Figure 1).

Decisions about whether to leave a school and/or the profession based in dissatisfaction are commonly associated with stress and burnout (AEU, 2021; Chang, 2009; Gundlach, 2022; McInerney et al., 2018; Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Teacher stress is commonly related to excessive workload and administrative causes (AEU, 2019; Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Longmuir et al., 2022).

This study is most concerned with voluntary retention (Griffeth & Hom, 2001) resulting from active job satisfaction and positive wellbeing despite stress (Element 5, Figure 1) (Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). These have been conceptualised as sustaining forces for retention (Schaefer et al., 2012), which are distinct from a lack of job dissatisfaction (Herzberg, 1968) or a lack of stress.

The Australian Education Union and AITSL have made recommendations on how to mitigate job stress due to workload through initiatives such as reducing class sizes, increasing non-teaching time available for lesson planning and reducing duties that are not directly connected to teaching (AEU, 2021; AITSL, 2020). Until such changes are made across all schools at the organisational level, however, teachers are left to cope with their workloads at an individual level, in their own roles (Element 6, Figure 1). And as, like job satisfaction, perceptions and experiences of stress are individual, investigating the coping strategies of teachers who manage stress well and stay in schools

and the profession is valuable (Cancio et al., 2018; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

Retention of English teachers is less commonly researched than that in other subject areas such as mathematics, science, languages and special education (Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008; Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Scherff & Hahs-Vaughn, 2008). In Australia, Manuel et al. (2019) found a connection between English teachers' commitment to the profession and their motivation to teach, and specifically that maintaining or even strengthening one's initial motivation to teach English, or identifying risks and challenges to the durability of one's motivation to teach, are means of sustaining careers in English teaching. Job crafting (Element 8, Figure 1) (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) is a relevant wellbeing theory that can develop our understanding of how English teachers can manipulate their perceptions and experience of their work roles to overcome less satisfying aspects of their job and actively increase job satisfaction, wellbeing and ultimately retention.

Job crafting concerns the ways in which individuals proactively and informally engage in behaviours that combat job demands, by manipulating, shaping and changing the 'task', 'relationship' and 'cognitive' aspects of their jobs to align with their values, interests, motivations, strengths and skills (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Petrou et al., 2012; Tims & Bakker, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) (Element 8, Figure 1). Job crafting has been found to have positive effects on employee wellbeing and personal work outcomes such as job satisfaction, engagement, commitment and performance (Harter et al., 2003; Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Research also suggests that job crafting can benefit organisations by promoting job redesign and innovation, and by reducing turnover (Harter et al., 2003; Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013).

'Task crafting' (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) occurs when employees adjust the type, scope or number of tasks they perform. They may add or remove tasks according to their strengths and interests. 'Relationship crafting' (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) involves employees changing the quality or frequency of their interactions with colleagues, customers or superiors. 'Cognitive crafting' (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) involves employees altering the ways in which they see and think about their job and their identity, by reframing it in a different light or creating a sense of personal meaning and purpose. It can also present as

the ways in which employees think about themselves in their work identities.

A growing body of research on teachers' job crafting behaviours has emerged in several countries, including Brazil (Paschoal et al., 2022), China (Huang, Sun, et al., 2022; Huang, Wang et al., 2022; Shang, 2022; Wu et al., 2023; Zhang & Parker, 2019; Zheng et al., 2023), Finland (Mäkikangas et al., 2023), Germany (Dreer, 2022; 2023), Italy (Ingusci et al., 2016), the Netherlands (van Wingerden & Poell, 2019), Romania (Ciuhan et al., 2021) and South Africa (du Toit et al., 2022). As job crafting is influenced by cultural and contextual factors, however, it is essential to explore this phenomenon across different nations, as employees' levels of comfort in modifying their work activities beyond their prescribed duties may vary (Huang, Wang et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). In Australia, the authors of the 15-item JCQ instrument adapted for this study (Element 7, Figure 1) (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013), have begun conducting interviews with Australian teachers to understand how they engage in job crafting (Slemp et al., 2023). Australian teachers work in a context where the style, type and timing of their work is quite autonomous, unsupervised and independent of other employees' work (Berg et al., 2010; Krantz-Kent, 2008; Rowan, 1994). The use of Australian secondary English teachers in this study thus represents a unique sample, complementing previous research conducted in subject fields such as mathematics (Wang et al., 2022), languages (Haneda & Sherman, 2018) and politics (Shang, 2022). It is also valuable to investigate job crafting in the context of secondary schools and compare it with that in early learning environments (Leana et al., 2009; Zheng et al., 2023) and primary-level settings (van Wingerden & Poell, 2019), as examining job crafting among both current and former English teachers of varied experience levels can offer a unique perspective to compare with prior research on pre-service teacher samples (Dreer, 2023).

Engaging in job crafting has been shown to have a multifaceted impact on teachers' work and careers. Research indicates that teachers who actively practice job crafting can enhance their creativity (Huang, Sun et al., 2022), work engagement, identity and wellbeing (Dreer, 2022; Peral & Geldenhuys, 2016; Shang, 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Zhai et al., 2023), and increase their job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Dreer, 2023; Leana et al., 2009). Additionally, job crafting can imbue teachers' work with a sense of meaning and act as a mediating strategy for coping with stress (Ciuhan

1. Teacher shortage	
High turnover/Low retention	Low supply

2. Career decision type (Griffeth & Hom, 2001)	
Voluntary	Involuntary

3. Teacher career destination	
Retention in profession	Attrition from profession

4. Retention in the profesison	
Migration	**Retention in school**

5. Reasons for retention	
Job satisfaction, Positive wellbeing	Other

6. Methods of coping	
Personal initiatives	School initiatives

7. JCQ coding framework (Adapted from Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013)		

8. Job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001)		
Task crafting	**Relationship crafting**	**Cognitive crafting**

9. Career decision motivation state (Hom et al., 2012)			
Enthusiastic stayer	Reluctant stayer	Enthusiastic leaver	Reluctant leaver

Figure 1

Conceptual framework (concepts of focus in bold)

et al., 2021; van Wingerden & Poell, 2019), ultimately contributing to a lower turnover intention (Leana et al., 2009).

Since this study began, new types of job crafting have emerged that are related to achieving better work-life balance by avoiding certain tasks (Wu et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a growing call for future research to delve deeper into teachers' job crafting behaviours, exploring their benefits and limitations and their influence on performance. Specifically, researchers have emphasised the importance of understanding teachers' own

perspectives on and cognitive processes regarding their work and wellbeing in relation to job crafting (Dreer, 2022; Mäkikangas et al., 2023). This study is thus positioned to contribute valuable insights into the specific job crafting activities undertaken by English teachers. The quantitative and qualitative data it presents complement the quantitative studies that have already established connections between job crafting and various work-related outcomes.

The scope of this research is concerned with neither individual teacher performance nor school performance, but instead with the individual's use of job crafting and its effects on job satisfaction, wellbeing and retention in schools and the teaching profession. To this end, the focal concepts for this study are highlighted in the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1 and referred to by element number in the literature review above. The framework culminates in the research questions below.

Research questions

What personal initiatives support the positive wellbeing, feelings of success and voluntary retention of English teachers in schools and the profession?

Which personal initiatives, if any, represent the activities of 'job crafting' in teaching?

The study

The study asked current and former secondary English teachers to consider the personal initiatives they had taken in their careers that resulted in feelings of positive wellbeing and success. Analysing lived experience of wellbeing and success from individuals' subjective perspectives is reflective of a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), and determining whether current teachers who express 'enthusiastic staying' intentions (Hom et al., 2012), or former teachers who had long, satisfying careers, performed job crafting in their roles can help to tackle the issue of excessive teacher turnover.

Method – data collection

The instrument of this study was an online, voluntary, anonymous survey used to collect open-ended text responses and multiple choice responses about participants' self-reported success and wellbeing, which was part of a larger study on teacher wellbeing and retention (Gundlach, 2022). An online survey is an optimal method for gathering data about how English teachers craft their jobs and make decisions

about their careers because it allows a large volume of data to be gathered quickly from a large sample of participants from across Australia, in an asynchronous manner, without the collection and transcription bias or errors that may occur when using interview or focus group methods. To avoid the collection of invalid data, participants were able to skip questions, except for those that assessed eligibility for the study (i.e., that participants were current or former secondary English teachers), and could end the survey at any time.

Unprompted, open-field text-style questions were used to allow participants to write as much as they desired about their job crafting activities and career decisions in their own words, without 'priming' certain topics in their responses (Johnson et al., 1990; Reja et al., 2003). Prompted multiple choice questions followed the unprompted questions, and participants could select more than one response to these simultaneously, as well as providing further options or elaborations in an open-text field labelled 'Other'. The anonymous nature of the survey supported participants in sharing personal, potentially sensitive information about their decisions to move schools and leave the profession or stay, as well as their job crafting activities, which could also be private and sensitive.

Method – sample and participants

The participants consisted of a sample of 304 Australian secondary English teachers with a range of experience levels (Table 1), drawn from a larger study's sample of 930 Australian K–12 teachers across all subject areas (Gundlach, 2022) which was recruited through advertising in online Australian professional teaching communities and use of snowball technique.

Using a sample of current and former English teachers' real, past behaviours and lived experiences has methodological advantages over a study of only pre-service or early-career teachers' hypothetical or future career intentions (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Manuel et al., 2019; Mason & Matas, 2015). It provides data about what real behaviours were performed and what factors influenced real career decisions, along with the insights that experienced teachers, particularly those who have had long, satisfying careers, can provide, which teachers who have not yet entered the workforce in a formal role or have not been working for more than a few years may not be able to.

Human Research Ethics was approved by the The University of Melbourne (Research ID 1954350.1). A

Table I

Participant demographics and responses

Demographic/response	% (n=304)	Demographic/response	%
Gender − *Female*	83%	Participants' attraction to teaching (Unpr.)	(n=283)
− *Male*	17%	*– Working with young people*	34%
Age − *21–30*	25%	*– Passion for act of teaching and education*	24%
− *31–40*	36%	*– Passion for subject English*	20%
− *41–50*	20%	*– To make a difference; meaningful work*	20%
− *51 & over*	19%	*– Job security, travel, flexibility*	13%
Work status − *Current teacher*	77%	*– Helping people in a social job*	12%
− *Retired teacher/Other*	14%	*– Positive experiences from own schooling*	8%
Teaching experience − *1−5 years*	24%	Participants' rating of their ITE as preparation for first teaching role (Pr.)	(n=304)
− *6−10 years*	28%	*– Extremely well*	7%
− *11−15 years*	18%	*– Very well*	26%
− *16−20 years*	12%	*– Satisfactorily*	45%
− *21−25 years*	5%	*– Slightly*	19%
− *26+ years*	12%	*– Not at all*	3%
Highest teaching qualification		Decade of teacher education	(n=300)
− *Certificate/Diploma*	33%	*− 2011–2020*	26%
− *Bachelor's degree*	24%	*− 2001–2010*	32%
− *Master's degree*	41%	*− 1970–2000*	42%
− *Doctorate*	1%		

Note: (Pr.) = Prompted question. (Unpr.) = Unprompted question. Totals may not equal 100% where non-exclusive options were selected or rounding occurred. (n<330) where participants did not answer.

plain language statement, consent form and debriefing statement were used.

Data analysis

As the multiple choice question responses were created using themes from a systematic review that was part of a broader study (Gundlach, 2022), data was coded to an existing framework. The data from the open-ended text response questions was open coded, then axial coded to themes also informed by the broader study (Gundlach, 2022). Thematic coding allowed basic quantitative population statistics such as frequency and percentage of responses to be reported. Any 'Other' responses offered by participants in response to multiple choice and open-ended questions were manually coded into existing themes; where applicable, new themes were created (Miles et al., 2014).

Participant responses about personal initiatives taken to maintain wellbeing and feel successful in the workplace were coded by the researcher to the themes of task crafting, cognitive crafting and relationship crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) using an adapted version of the fifteen-item JCQ (Table 2) (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013).

Findings

The sub-sample of 304 secondary English teachers had age (M = 40.11, SD = 11.73), gender (83% female), teaching experience (M = 12.84 years, SD = 9.98 years) and teaching qualification proportions (Diploma 33%, Bachelor's 24%, Master's 41%s) that were reflective of the larger study's sample of K–12 teachers of all subjects (n=930). Current teachers accounted for 77% of the sub-sample (n=304), while making up 85% of the larger sample's proportion (n=930) (Gundlach, 2022). The sub-sample comprised 100% secondary

Table 2

Coding framework

Job crafting classification	Behaviours
Task crafting	Introduces new approaches to improve one's work
	Changes the scope or types of tasks completed at work
	Introduces new work tasks that they think better suits one's skills or interests
	Chooses to take on additional tasks at work
	Gives preference to work tasks that suits one's skills or interests
Relationship crafting	Makes an effort to get to know people well at work
	Organises or attends work-related social functions
	Organises special events in the workplace (e.g., birthdays)
	Chooses to mentor new employees (officially or unofficially)
	Makes friends with people at work who have similar skills or interests
Cognitive crafting	Thinks about how one's job gives one's life purpose
	Reminds oneself about the significance one's work has for the success of the organisation
	Reminds oneself of the importance of one's work for the broader community
	Think about the ways in which one's work positively impacts one's life
	Reflect on the role one's job has for one's overall wellbeing

(Adapted from Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013).

English teachers, who represented 32% of the larger study's sample (Gundlach, 2022).

As this study focused on job satisfaction and positive wellbeing reasons for staying, unprompted and prompted questions asked participants about decisions they had made to stay in schools and in the teaching profession that were related to their wellbeing and feelings of success rather than to other reasons such as family commitments, financial obligations or contracts. This is important, as the top three (unprompted) reasons given for staying in a school or the profession when considering leaving (n=135) were relationships with students (24%), financial obligations (20%) and relationships with colleagues (17%). In the study, staying in a school for financial reasons or 'a lack of alternative employment' only (10%) would be considered 'reluctant staying' (Hom et al., 2012).

Looking at Element 6 of the conceptual framework (Figure 1), participants' responses about initiatives that promoted individual wellbeing and success were organised based on whether the individual or the school had instigated them. School-level initiatives that promoted wellbeing and success are reported in Table 3. When looking at unprompted and prompted responses together, social events, school-instigated professional learning, collaborative teams, formal mentoring and quality resources were the most common initiatives reported. Note that these responses do not indicate the effectiveness or strength of the relationship, only their frequency.

Having excluded supports for wellbeing and success instigated by schools (Table 3), this study focused on personally instigated initiatives. Prompted responses regarding personal initiatives (Table 4) indicated that socialising with colleagues from other faculties (83%), engaging in professional learning events (65%), debriefing with colleagues outside of school (61%) and requesting preferred workloads (e.g., year levels and curriculum areas) (61%) were the most common initiatives taken.

Unprompted responses to a question about what initiatives made participants feel successful in their role and experience positive wellbeing (n=243) were coded according to Slemp and Vella-Brodrick's (2013) JCQ framework (Elements 7 & 8, Figure 1) and are reported in the first column of Table 5. The approaches used by participants predominantly took the forms of task crafting (42%) and relationship crafting (34%). Cognitive crafting (16%) was less common, a result that will be explored in more depth in the next section. Some participants' responses (6%, n=243) about what promoted positive wellbeing and made them feel successful could not be classified either as school initiatives or job crafting; these included exercise, professional counselling, mental health days and support from friends and family.

Two multiple choice questions asked the current teachers in the sample about their intentions to stay at their current schools and in the profession. Responses were coded to Hom et al.'s (2012) framework of motivational states, which encompass a desire to stay or leave and a perception of control over this preference (Element 9, Figure 1), and results are reported in Table 6. In terms of retention in their current schools,

Table 3

School initiatives for wellbeing and success (unprompted and prompted)

School initiatives (unprompted)	(n=185) %	School initiatives (prompted)	(n=262) %
– Social events (onsite & offsite)	30%	– Sharing an office with English colleagues	57%
– Professional learning	16%	– Duplicate classes	47%
– Recognition	14%	– Regular team meetings	47%
– Teamwork	9%	– A robust curriculum and resources	45%
– Leadership	9%	– Access to printing/copying facilities	41%
– Formal mentoring	5%	– Mentoring	40%
– Workload reduction methods (incl. resource sharing)	9%	– A strong behaviour management system	34%

Note: n<330 as not all participants completed all questions. Totals do not equal 100% due to non-exclusive options selected.

Table 4

Participants' personal initiatives for wellbeing and success

Personal-level initiatives for feelings of wellbeing and success (Prompted)	(n=277) %
– Socialising with colleagues from other faculties	83%
– Engaging in professional learning events (own choice)	65%
– Debriefing with colleagues outside school	61%
– Requesting subjects for preferred cohort or curriculum	61%
– Sourcing learning resources (e.g., texts, equipment) one wants to use	36%
– Setting up email folders and/or task prioritisation system	33%
– Working collegially on tasks normally performed individually	30%
– Using one's own diary/calendar system for one's needs	27%

s

Table 5

Prevalence of job crafting in sample and 'enthusiastic stayers' sub-sample

Job crafting activity	Whole sample in school or profession (n = 243) %	Enthusiastic stayers in schools (n = 71) %	Enthusiastic stayers in the profession (n = 48) %
– Task crafting	42%	54%	54%
– Relationship crafting	34%	33%	28%
– Cognitive crafting	16%	17%	33%

Note: n<330 as not all participants completed all questions. Totals do not necessarily equal 100% due to non-exclusive answers provided

participants (n=233) demonstrated characteristics of 'enthusiastic stayers' (33%) and 'reluctant stayers' (22%) in higher proportions than 'enthusiastic leavers' (10%) and reluctant leavers (3%). Where participants felt that the options provided did not capture their intentions, 'Other' responses were further coded. A significant proportion (31%) felt neutral about an intention to leave or stay at their school, but explicitly stated that they were open to offers from other schools.

For present intention to remain in the profession (n=232), participants demonstrated characteristics of 'enthusiastic stayers' (53%), 'enthusiastic leavers' (16%) and 'reluctant stayers' (12%). There were no reluctant leavers (0%). A significant proportion (31%) felt neutral about an intention to leave or stay at their school but explicitly stated that they were open to careers outside

Table 6

Current teachers present career intentions for school and profession

Current teachers' career intentions	School (n = 233) %	Profession (n = 232) %
– *Enthusiastic stayer*	33%	53%
– *Reluctant stayer*	22%	12%
– *Enthusiastic leaver*	10%	16%
– *Reluctant leaver*	3%	0%
– *Neutral, but open to offers elsewhere*	31%	28%

Note: n<330 as this question was directed at only current teacher in the sample.

teaching if these were offered.

As the survey generated both quantitative and qualitative data, participants' responses to unprompted questions are used below to illustrate some of the broader trends communicated by the frequency tables. Where quotations are used, participant age and years of experience are reported in parentheses as follows: A#, E#.

Classifying job crafting types from participant responses

Using the JCQ (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013) as a coding framework was straightforward. Participants frequently made comments that connected to more than one type of job crafting, such as:

I changed my mindset to a more positive one to help me see my workload as part of my job rather than a burden; embraced co-curricular activities as a means to build better relationships with students; [and] organised fun with my colleagues [and] professional development. (A44, E17)

In this example, the participant's reference to changing her mindset was coded as 'cognitive crafting'; adding extra activities was coded as 'task crafting'; and developing relationships with students and colleagues was coded as 'relationship crafting'. Where participants noted how one element of crafting caused an improvement in what might be deemed another area of crafting (e.g., task crafting affecting relationship crafting, see below), both areas were coded. For example, one experienced teacher found that adding co-curricular tasks to her workload improved her relationships:

Contributions to extracurricular activities such as sports, school concerts and productions and staff association activities […] have strengthened my relationships with students and colleagues. (A40, E19)

Task crafting

Task crafting was used by 42% of the sample (n=243). Participant responses indicated task crafting predominantly took the form of introducing new work tasks that they thought suited their skills or interests or developed their knowledge, and new approaches that would improve their work, most commonly in the form of organised or self-directed professional development:

I've sought out additional opportunities for professional growth through ACARA [The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority] and the VCAA [Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority] as I don't always feel stimulated in my current environment. (A70, E41)

A key distinction between task crafting and a school initiative was that participants who engaged in task crafting sought out their own formal and informal professional development; it was not mandated by the school or the profession.

In most cases, participants engaged in task crafting by taking on more duties outside the regular role of English teacher:

I sought increased responsibility [… and] volunteered for roles in the school outside my field, even Occupational Health & Safety Officer, to learn more. (A(n/a), E18)

The duties involved were not always connected to existing leadership positions or opportunities; rather, they were ones that participants crafted for themselves:

I created a role for myself. There was a lack of student-led social justice activities, so I put forward a proposal. [M]y involvement is voluntary, but [it is] the highlight of my week. (A42, E20)

I created elective subjects which were of interest to me and filled a gap in the curriculum. The creation of these subjects felt very much like a passion project. (A32, E10)

Not all task crafting involved taking on more duties, however. Many responses noted that extra duties made it difficult to 'leave work at work', particularly as co-curricular activities are generally performed outside of regular teaching hours – before school, during recess and lunchtime, after school or even at weekends:

I no longer say 'yes' to extracurricular activities, as they have added to workload significantly, and in order to maintain my mental health, I've recognised I cannot contribute the way I used to. (A42, E16)

Throwing myself into co-curricular activities … or getting subjects that I'm passionate about to run can help. However, these things can also take a lot of time and energy and are difficult to maintain. I feel like I'm always treading a line between getting involved and offering a part of myself but being careful not to offer too much to the point of burnout. It's hard to find the right balance. You have to put your own wellbeing first, because when you're frazzled or stressed, you can't perform at your best. (A35, E8)

Having some control over one's workload in terms of the teaching and duties involved by means of adding, varying, maintaining or removing items, was reported as a means of promoting wellbeing and feeling successful:

Changing my load, subjects, positions of responsibility keep[s] me interested and always learning. (A50, E28)

Teaching the same subject for more than one year helped reduce the amount of preparation required. (A35, E10)

Another interesting task crafting concept reported was the use of formal adjustments to employment type. Teachers noted that reducing their teaching loads from full-time to part-time enabled them to miss some meetings, go home when not teaching, avoid taking a tutor group, attend fewer assemblies, do fewer yard duties and support wellbeing:

Reducing my time fraction has allowed me to avoid some of the needless politics, meetings and jumping through hoops. (A40, E17)

Relationship crafting

Just over a third of participants (34%, n=243) reported engaging in relationship crafting activities such as getting to know students and colleagues well at work, attending work-related social functions and mentoring new employees. Though Item 15 of Slemp and Vella-Brodrick's (2013) JCQ, 'making friends at work who have similar skills and interests', was not mentioned explicitly, participant comments suggested that in the case of secondary English teachers, this might be a naturally occurring aspect of belonging to a faculty group interested in literature and language. Also uncommon was reference to organising special events in the workplace, but again, the nature of schools might naturally lend itself to an abundance of events, themed weeks and occasions that other professions do not have as part of their regular calendar.

It is generally recognised that teachers' work involves them spending more time with their students than with their adult colleagues – potentially as much as 18–20+ hours with students and 3–4 with colleagues (AITSL, 2021; Hunter & Parkinson, 2023; OECD, 2014; QTU, 2023). Though teachers cannot usually pick the students in their classes or select which students they will work with most, there was an abundance of participant comments extolling the utility and reward of proactively strengthening relationships as a means of making work more satisfying:

I surround myself with positive people. I join and create professional networks. I make an effort to establish and maintain strong and affirming relationships with leaders, peers, students and families. (A48, E16)

Cognitive crafting

Only 16% (n=243) of the participants engaged in activities that could be coded as cognitive crafting. It is possible that when it comes to considering initiatives for wellbeing, one's mindset is less tangible than what one does or who one works with, so using prompted questions about this type of job crafting may yield different results. It is also possible that relative to other professions, teachers are more naturally aware of the importance and meaning of their work for the broader community:

Throughout the highs and lows of my long career I have never doubted the importance of my role. I'm always proud to say I'm a teacher and it's central to my identity. (A59, E37)

Some participants' comments suggested that instead of using cognitive crafting to add meaning and importance to how they think about their work, they used it to *reduce* the meaning attributed to their individual duties and to create a barrier between home life and work, especially when technology allows or even create an expectation that work will continue at home:

I've always aimed to keep my work in perspective. If a student doesn't submit work or fails to complete work in class, it's not something I can entirely control. I think to be successful you need to be able to recognise what is worth getting anxious, upset, or angry about. (A35, E12)

Several comments explored the idea that society's expectations of teachers and their workloads are not achievable, and participants used cognitive crafting as a means of 'making peace' with that realisation.

[I] created a balance and avoided letting work take over: keeping home for personal life as much as possible. (A52, E28)

Synthesis of findings

From a sample of Australian secondary English teachers of varying age, experience-level, education-level and current working status, this study generated quantitative and qualitative data about what sustains their wellbeing and makes them feel successful, and what kinds of job crafting they engage in. For the current teachers in the sample, career intention data for retention in their current schools and the profession were also captured. For participants in the sample who had ever considered leaving a school or the profession and stayed, their reasons for retention were identified. At a time of teacher shortage, such findings provide valuable insight into what sustains teachers and keeps them in schools and the profession.

Teachers' work can be relatively unsupervised and autonomous, and many opportunities exist in schools for teachers to task craft by taking on extracurricular roles, both formally and informally. While with the exception of nominating a year level or subject preference, teachers cannot often choose their students, some participants reported relationship crafting by seeking out or avoiding certain colleagues, superiors and parents. The results suggest that cognitive crafting may be more inherent to the teaching profession, where the impact one's work has on the organisation is clear. An emergent finding, however, is that some teachers may use job crafting to reduce tasks, avoid some relationships and reduce the meaning ascribed to their roles in order to preserve wellbeing and promote work-life balance:

[I] make a concerted effort to not get involved in things that will stress me out. This includes avoiding conversations with certain people, not attending certain events, and staying away from staffroom gossip. (A33, E7)

This supports the more recently proposed model of 'avoidance crafting', in which wellbeing is sustained by actively decreasing the negative aspects and demands of work (Wu et al., 2023).

Implications for school leadership and policy

To sustain English teachers in their work, schools can improve their awareness of the number, nature and timing of the tasks required of teachers in their roles. This will be useful not only for monitoring excessive workloads, but also for providing professional growth and variety to employees, as this appears to have an ability to engage teachers in their careers. Allowing teachers to have input into their workloads, allowing duplicate classes, splitting certain tasks among members of a team and promoting informal and formal mentoring and learning opportunities are other ways schools can take some control over activities that might otherwise be individually task crafted. Finding ways to develop staff by providing appealing roles, positions and duties may also help teachers to resist competitors' offers based on promotions and salary raises.

Positive relationships with colleagues were identified as a strong retaining force, so schools could consider supporting staff room allocations, team building, team meetings and the creation of spaces that allow productive formal and informal meetings between staff as well as satisfying, appropriate social interaction. Allowing staff some choice of or input into who they share an office with is one way in which schools could incorporate relationship crafting while retaining control. And as positive relationships with students are a top retaining force, schools and policy-makers should be mindful of workloads and roles that take teachers' time away from work with students, as well as the teacher-student culture of interaction.

Few participant responses reflected the cognitive crafting items of the JCQ (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). In fact, the relevant responses indicated that instead a form of cognitive crafting was used to create barriers between teachers' work responsibilities and their home lives, in order to prevent exploitation (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), as extra work in schools is almost always unpaid. This study has also revealed that cognitive job crafting might have a different tone in professions where there is an existing high level of societal meaning attached to the work. In the interests of teacher retention in both schools and the profession, schools should recognise

the extra duties taken on by teachers that are not explicitly listed in their job descriptions.

It is important to note that this study has looked at job crafting as a means of promoting wellbeing, feelings of success and retention in schools and in the profession. It has been outside its scope to look at teachers' performance, their individual skills and growth, or organisational performance overall. There are valid arguments that job crafting can negatively impact employees, their colleagues and organisations, as allowing employees to job craft excessively could result in staff who neglect certain activities, do not learn new skills because they do not performing tasks they are not already interested in or skilled at, and do not work with colleagues, students or parents they do not like, or alternatively, create staff who negatively affect their own wellbeing by taking on too much extra work (Harju et al., 2021; Neale, 2019; Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Tims et al., 2012). Alignment between the employee's goals and the organisation's goals are thus critical for successful job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Implications for future research

This study answered the call for teacher retention research looking at English teachers specifically (Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008; Hancock & Scherff, 2010), and used current and former teachers of English (see Manuel et al., 2019) instead of the often-researched pre-service English teachers (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Manuel, 2003; Manuel & Carter, 2016). By using a sample with diverse levels of experience, education levels and career intentions, it produced data that was illustrative of real past behaviours and real, current career intentions and job crafting behaviours. The survey method did not prompt or prime the participants in any way about job crafting, which meant that the coding of the responses according to Slemp and Vella-Brodrick's (2013) JCQ gave an accurate assessment of the frequency of the three types of job crafting. There is thus potential for future studies to apply the JCQ to teachers more specifically in order to gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which of the five activities associated with each of the three types of job crafting are used and their mean for each item.

The English teachers surveyed also provided a novel context in which to study job crafting. Teachers have varied tasks, relatively high levels of autonomy and relatively unstructured work (Job and Skills Australia, 2023; Mäkikangas et al., 2023), which provides them

with significant opportunities for task crafting. How do teachers task craft away from non-preferred activities? Teachers cannot control which students they work with, so how do they relationship craft with disliked colleagues, students and parents? Teaching has no financial objective and is laden with societal purpose, which raises questions about whether cognitive crafting is more necessary in other professions. Do teachers cognitively craft their responsibility level for certain students or situations? Empirically assessing these questions would advance our understanding of the value of job crafting not only in teaching, but in general. Finally, job crafting may contribute to job satisfaction and positive wellbeing, but does it lead to superior learning outcomes for students and improved organisational performance? This study has only begun to explore the many connections between job crafting and teachers' work that are worth investigating.

Conclusion

The teacher shortage is an issue in Australia, and teachers at all experience levels will continue to leave schools and the profession when their job satisfaction is inadequate and their wellbeing is poor. Stress is a major contributor to negative wellbeing and job dissatisfaction. Workload is a major contributor to stress, and the workload of Australian English teachers is substantial. Schools and policy-makers need to take steps to reduce the burden on teachers, but until they do teachers will attempt to cope with their workloads at an individual level, by job crafting the types and quantity of their work tasks, the quality and number of their interpersonal relationships and how they think of their work. However, while job crafting can assist in coping with work demands, there is a risk that teachers job crafting will have unintended effects on organisational performance, and increase the potential for teachers to take on even more work.

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'It's not not consent':
Using Literature to Teach Sexual Consent in Secondary English Classrooms

Elizabeth Little and Kristine Moruzi, Deakin University

Abstract: This article argues that English classrooms are valuable spaces in which consent education can be incorporated into the existing curriculum. English classrooms have the potential to be rich sites of engagement with contemporary issues, as English is a mandatory subject within which the study of literary texts offers openings for complex, multifaceted discussions about power, agency and consent. This article presents the findings of a research project titled *Mediating consent through young adult fantasy literature* that seeks to unpack how young people understand sexual intimacy in the popular novels they read. Through a discussion of three popular young adult fantasy texts with teenage readers, we demonstrate that these conversations do not necessitate including explicit sex scenes; instead, the 'lived' relationship dynamics in fiction can create an opportunity for nuanced discussions and understandings of consent.

Keywords: consent, literature, sex education, critical literacy

Introduction

In April 2023, the Australian television network SBS aired a documentary called *Asking for it: The sexual revolution about consent*. Despite consent education having been prioritised for several years, the program demonstrated there was a still a long way to go in ensuring the autonomy and safety of young people navigating sexual and intimate relationships. Hill (2023) notes in the introduction to the series that 'every time we touch each other, we are negotiating consent', and that the negotiation is becoming 'more nuanced' and 'we got it wrong more often than not'. She states that 'consent is a red-hot national conversation'. In the Australian context, this concern follows on from events occurring in 2021 that highlighted the importance of better education about sexual consent. First, Grace Tame was named Australian of the Year after her successful campaign #LetHerSpeak enabled sexual assault survivors to share their experiences. Second, Brittany Higgins alleged that she had been raped in Parliament House, Canberra, the 'safest building in the country' (Higgins, 2022). Third, in a specific response to the culture of sexual assault in schools, teenager Chanel Contos launched an online campaign asking her Instagram followers if they or someone they knew had been sexually assaulted at school. In the first 24 hours, she received over 200 responses, and eventually over the course of the year received more than 6,750. She then launched the *Teach Us Consent* campaign, which lobbies for 'holistic consent and sexuality education'. Contos's campaign demonstrated not only the need but the clear appetite of students for sexuality and consent education to be a part of their classroom learning. As Hill (2023) notes, 2021 saw an 'outpouring of rage' where the 'aftershocks are still rippling through the nation'.

In this cultural moment, and amidst public outrage and concern, more opportunities for including consent education can be incorporated into already existing educational spaces. English classrooms have the potential to be rich sites of engagement with contemporary

issues, as this subject is compulsory for all students and literary texts offer opportunities to have complex, multifaceted discussions about power, agency and consent. This article presents the findings of a research project titled *Mediating consent through young adult fantasy literature* which sought to unpack how young people understand sexual intimacy in the popular novels they read. Yet this research also revealed a desire from the research participants for more opportunities to discuss consent in classrooms, particularly English and Literature classrooms. In light of this, we argue that English education policy, faculty leaders and leading practitioners can and should incorporate texts that provide opportunities for discussing consent and sexual intimacy in English classrooms. Through a discussion of three popular Young Adult fantasy texts with teenage readers, we demonstrate that discussing intimacy between characters, and their broader relationships, makes conversations about consent possible. The 'lived' relationship dynamics within fiction create an opportunity for nuanced discussions and understandings of consent.

For this special issue on Literary Studies and Literary Education, we outline the ways in which tertiary literary studies and research can inform and enhance secondary English and literary education. Noting the call from Kuttainen and Hansen (2020), who argue for the importance of working relationships between tertiary and secondary English educators, we explore how utilising the tertiary-secondary nexus and taking up tertiary researchers' expertise and resources leads to improved pedagogy and educational outcomes in secondary institutions. Our research demonstrates that these two systems can and do talk to each other, often with powerful effect. Building on earlier research, the *Mediating consent through Young Adult fantasy literature* research project engaged three teen readers in discussions of young adult (YA) fantasy to explore how consent could be understood through these texts. The participants demonstrated sophisticated engagement with ideas about consent and explored the narrative complexities of depicting consensual sexual intimacy. This paper also builds on recent research that has demonstrated the importance of consent education in schools, and the potential of English texts to be tools for creating discussion, because, as McLean Davies et al. (2022) explain, 'the rich text of a novel can provide access to the complexity and depth of experiences' (pp. 1–2) of those involved. Our research offers an opportunity to hear from young people themselves about how texts can provide opportunities for engagement with various aspects of romantic and sexual relationships. In particular, our participants' discussions highlight the complexity of power imbalances, the language that emphasises a character's sexuality, and the importance of holding people to account for their actions. Through the lens of popular YA fantasy texts aimed at teen readers, we argue that appropriate text selection in English can further conversations that are happening across curriculums and enrich young people's understanding of consent. Our research shows how texts that are not primarily about consent can be used as a springboard for important discussions with young people, potentially mitigating concerns raised by teachers about the complexity of text selection (McLean Davies et al., 2022).

Consent, texts and the curriculum

Contemporary research on sexuality education in schools notes that consent is now a focus. As Fischel argued in 2016, sex education has entered 'the age of consent', and this has only become more evident since. Research shows that young people have been asking for opportunities to explore intimate, sexual relationships, consent and sexual violence for years (Carmody & Willis, 2006; Ollis & Dyson, 2017). In response to this growing call for sexuality and consent education, Education ministers from around Australia 'unanimously agreed to implement an holistic and age-appropriate consent curriculum' by 2023 (Elias, 2022).

Schools have been required to incorporate consent education into existing sex education frameworks. In New South Wales, consent is taught 'through sexuality education programs' that are 'reflective of the NSW Personal Development, Health and Physical Education' curriculum (NSW Government, 2023). In Victoria, the Department of Education created the *Stepping out against gender-based violence* curriculum (Ollis, 2014) to accompany the *Resilience, rights and respectful relationships* curriculum (Victorian Government, 2023).

However, implementation within the curriculum has led many to note the significant gap that exists between mandating curriculum and the teaching that takes place in the classroom. As Keddie (2021) notes, 'most schools are inclusive spaces, and many principals and teachers are doing great equity work', but the 'reality of consent education is far more complex' (p. 26). She states that 'many teachers feel ill-equipped

and uncomfortable engaging in conversations about sexual consent with students', as they feel they do not have 'the necessary knowledge and sensibilities' to guide the conversation (Keddie, 2021, p. 28). McLean Davies et al. (2022) similarly note the 'lack of professional learning and curriculum frameworks' (p. 33) available to teachers and recommend additional support and resources 'for teachers to contribute to consent education' (p. 37).

The challenges of curriculum design for consent and sexuality education are mirrored in broader discussions about text selection in English and Literature classrooms. Many competing interests influence text choices, with teachers needing to select texts that appeal to the broader student body, provide opportunities to meet learning and assessment needs, and are available as teaching resources. In recent years there has been a clear push to include more 'diverse' texts on lists, with McLean Davies et al. (2022) noting that the broader cultural shift towards hearing marginal stories is 'not necessarily reflected in schools, notably in the texts that are listed and selected' (p. 465). In their analysis of the text lists for the Senior Victorian English curriculum between 2010 and 2019, Bliss and Bacalja (2021) argue that while text selection appears to be 'largely in step with the values of the wider community' in terms of its inclusion of diversity, the teaching and implementation of those texts is 'vague and undefined' (p. 167). More recently, Little and Aglinskas (2023) have argued that appropriate text selection creates opportunities to broaden students' understanding of complex issues. We hold that this should include contemporary concerns such as consent.

Recent research has directly considered the representation of sexuality and relationships in classrooms texts, but this has primarily focused on the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ voices. McKnight (2018) and McGraw and van Leent (2018) have noted the centring of heteronormative relationships in senior English texts that depict relationships. While McGraw and van Leent (2018) rightly call for the inclusion of marginalised representations of gender and sexuality, McKnight (2018) goes further, asking teachers to move beyond the 'tokenism' of simply including a text and instead transform their teaching practice to include 'philosophies of inclusion' (p. 15). We contribute to these ongoing discussions by arguing that 'diverse' texts included in English classrooms should include representations of sexual and romantic relationships that provide opportunities for

students to engage in discussions about consent.

Furthermore, our research contributes to scholarship examining the role of YA literature, and YA fantasy texts specifically, in influencing readers' understanding of romance and sexuality. Brown et al. (2006) argue that teenagers 'consistently cite' YA literature as an 'important' source of information (p. 1019). Bonomi et al. (2014) argue that YA stories are 'especially influential' because readers' 'cognitive resources, emotions and mental imagery are engaged' (p. 734). Unlike textbooks, websites and class activities, narratives provide details 'not just of the sex act, but also of the emotional component of intimacy' (Pattee, 2006, p. 34), thereby enabling readers to explore these aspects as well. Sorsoli et al. (2006) have found that scripts between characters 'become internalised' by teenage audiences, and they argue that 'adolescents become quite nonreflective about behaviours' in texts when they are not critically examined (p. 28).

While we do not necessarily argue for the inclusion of YA literature or YA fantasy texts in English text lists, this article demonstrates the potential of including such texts in the classroom. Furthermore, we highlight the importance of encouraging young people to develop a critical literacy of consent, not just when reading YA literature but when approaching any text. Clear consideration of the depiction of romance and sexuality in the texts chosen for English and Literature is needed.

Methodology and feminist research framework

This article details findings from the research project *Mediating consent through young adult fantasy literature.* This research project obtained high-risk ethics clearance before commencing.[1] The empirical data was collected during two focus groups at a Catholic secondary school in rural Victoria. Three students participated in the focus groups; they were invited to participate due to their involvement in a previous research project on reader responses to YA fantasy texts. They were asked to gain parental permission, as well as to give informed consent themselves. The participants were in Year 10 (one participant) and Year 12 (two participants). During two focus group sessions, they were asked about their current understanding of consent, where they thought they had learned these ideas, and how selected YA fantasy novels (*A court of thorns and roses* by Sarah J. Maas, *Red queen* by Victoria Aveyard, *Valentine* by Jodi McAlister and *Legendborn* by Tracy Deonn) addressed questions of consent. The recordings of these

focus groups were then transcribed and a discourse analysis undertaken.

This research, and especially the discourse analysis, is underpinned by a feminist research framework. We understand the 'truth' of the young people's approach to consent as being influenced by their sociocultural subjectivity. Gill (2007) has argued for understanding girls' agency and voice as being produced through their sociocultural environment. Ringrose (2013) similarly asserts that feminist research moves 'beyond any empiricist desire to privilege teen girls' narrative voice … as neutral' and calls on researchers to utilise an 'intersectional approach' where concepts of 'race, class, gender, sexuality, age' and 'ability' are considered (p. 65). This means that rather than taking what they say as an absolute truth, our discourse analysis of the transcripts is undertaken in light of the girls' own subjectivities. We have included a short biography of each girl (see below) to demonstrate their sociocultural environments and bring context to how we understand their 'truth'. These introductions were written by the participants themselves after they were shown examples of the researchers' biographies. In short, the participants identify as girls, Australian, white, Western, middle-class, Catholic-school-educated young women. Their discussion demonstrates awareness of queerness, but they do not openly identify as LGBTQIA+.

Furthermore, we note the 'impossibility of using a "correct" scientific method to obtain unbiased true results' (Bell et al., 2020, p. 3) and instead position our research as part of constructing a better understanding of multiple truths. As Lather (1991) acknowledges, the 'truth' is not something asserted by the researcher, but rather seen as a text, 'subject to multiple interpretations, multiple readings, multiple uses' (p. vii). Rather than presenting this discussion as including the voices of only three participants, limited to one school context and discussing a limited number of texts, our feminist methodological framing therefore emphasises the value of including *any* voices of young people within various contexts when discussing issues pertinent to them. We have intentionally included their language in as unedited a form as possible, with pauses, slang and their own phrasing. Although it does not always use the 'correct' syntax, communicating their truth in their words was important. We view our project as part of a body of work that contributes to uncovering various truths of how different young people experience sexuality and consent education, and what they want to see in the future.

Biographies

Jess's favourite books are YA fantasy. She particularly likes *Harry Potter* (Rowling), *The Medoran chronicles* (Noni) and *The infernal devices* (Clare). Jess was excited by the prospect of 'book club', and particularly the opportunity to express her opinion and engage in debates.

Samantha is an avid reader. She reads an average of a book a week, across many genres. In particular, she enjoys reading YA fantasy. Samantha is academically strong and enjoys school. She really enjoys participating in debating. Samantha was excited to participate in book club, especially the opportunity to discuss books with other girls.

Ari is the youngest member of book club. Despite this, she is confident in voicing her opinions and was excited to participate in the book club. Ari loves reading all kinds of books, but has particularly been enjoying some of the 'classic' YA fantasy books, like the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series. Ari does not really like romance in books and much prefers action. She also loves *BookTube* and computer games.

Understanding consent and consent education

In this section, we outline the participants' understandings of consent and their perceptions of the consent education currently being undertaken in their school. This initial conversation was intended to help frame the research by demonstrating what the participants believed about consent from the outset. As discussed below, it also highlighted to us the need to consider how consent is included in curriculums and then delivered in classrooms, and demonstrated the scope for including these discussions in English curriculum and classrooms.

Questions of sexual consent are especially relevant for young people, and legal definitions of consent are being updated. Victoria and New South Wales, for instance, introduced affirmative consent legislation in 2022 requiring that each person participating in a sexual act say or do something to confirm that the other person(s) consent to sexuality activity, and that all people involved must have the capacity to consent (Youth Law Australia, 2023). Queensland has a similar model in which consent must be informed, voluntary and revocable. Each person must be of an age and state to consent; the consent cannot be coerced, and it can be withdrawn at any time (Queensland Health, 2022). Western Australia's 2021 explanation of consent defines it as freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic and

specific (Department of Health, 2021). These new definitions suggest that although consent has multiple, intersecting meanings in the twenty-first century (Greenblatt & Valens, 2018), obtaining informed, voluntary consent is imperative.

Three distinct aspects of sexual consent have been highlighted by Muehlenhard et al. (2016) in their survey of its varied definitions. The first refers to an internal state of willingness that can be legally difficult to prove (Graf & Johnson, 2021) since it involves the mental state of the participant. The second is explicit agreement, which is the focus of most recent sexual consent campaigns and legislative changes because it requires affirmative consent. This laudable goal can nonetheless be complicated by uneven power dynamics and coercion (Graf & Johnson, 2021) and understood as a form of heterosexual bias (Richardson, 2022). The final aspect refers to behaviours that are interpreted as demonstrating willingness. The problem here is that the process of interpretation is individual, and different observers may apply different standards. Consequently, as Beres (2014) argues, 'the concept of consent does not resonate with the young people engaging in various forms of heterosex and the concept of consent is of limited use in sexual violence prevention' (p. 374). If, as she suggests, 'consent is more frequently communicated not-verbally' (Beres, 2014, p. 375) in young people's sexual activity, the ability to analyse sexual activity in literary texts offers an opportunity to consider the range of 'behaviors, cues, or signals' (Muehlenhard et al., 2016, p. 463) that may indicate willingness.

Consent can be understood as a 'discrete event' or as a 'continuous process' (Muehlenhard et al., 2016, p. 464). The discrete event refers to 'saying or doing something that is interpreted as consent' (Muehlenhard et al., 2016, p. 464), such as answering positively when a partner asks whether you will have sex or performing a behaviour indicating consent. In these cases, consent may be considered to be ongoing 'unless the person does something to retract their consent' (Muehlenhard et al. 2016, p. 464). In contrast, consent as a process can be seen as an 'ongoing negotiation' or as a 'continuous process of evaluating a partner's behavior' to ensure consent is still ongoing (Muehlenhard et al., 2016, p. 464). Although our purpose in this project is not to define consent, we use the terminology above to help explicate and interpret the participants' definitions and understandings of the term.

During the first focus groups, the participants were asked to define and create a mind map of terms they associated with consent.[2]
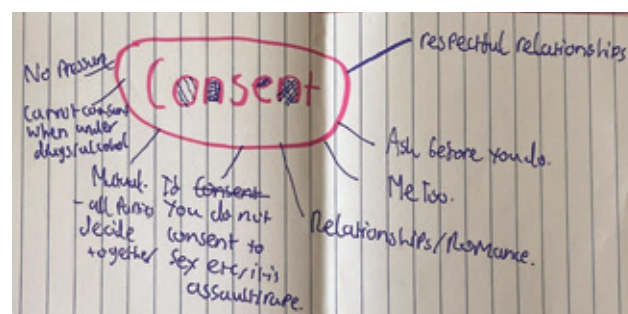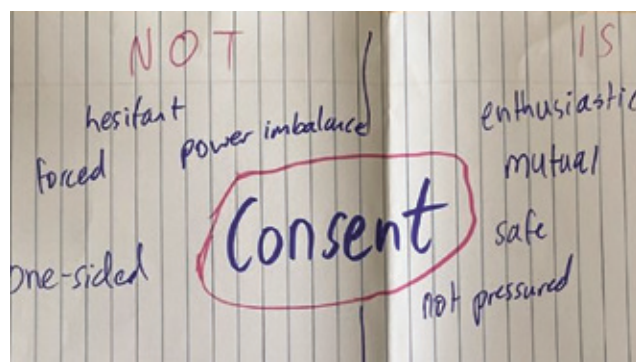

Figure 1 – Ari

Figure 2 – Jess

Figure 3 – Samantha

All three girls wrote that consent needed to be 'mutual', with Jess and Samantha also indicating that the sexual activity should also be 'desired' and 'enthusiastic' and not 'hesitant', 'unwanted' or 'one-sided.' Ari identifies relevant social contexts such as #MeToo and Respectful Relationships. Taught from Foundation (first year of primary school) to Year 12, Respectful Relationships is designed to embed a 'cultural of respect and equality across the entire school community' (Victorian Government, 2023). In later discussion, however, the participants demonstrated varied responses to this program: 'We haven't done that'; 'We did it last year'; 'We might have done that, but all we really do is pray'. For a curriculum explicitly designed to improve students' understanding of their own agency and responsibilities in relationships, it appears to be missing the mark.

The participants were then asked to share their understandings of consent with the group. Jess described consent as needing to be 'mutual', something that 'both or all parties, um, like, decide together'. She said that there had to be 'no pressure, or anything that can like, influence the decision'. Ari stated that 'you can't consent if you're under the influence of drugs and alcohol'. These comments indicate the girls' knowledge of affirmative consent and how both parties must be willing in order for consent to be present.

The participants indicated that they were getting information on consent from a range of sources. Jess explained that it was 'more just like, my own, like, knowledge' and that she had noticed a lot of talk about it 'on BookTube'.[3] Later in the focus group she mentioned another online source, BookTok, and Ari mentioned Goodreads reviews as a space for learning about romantic and sexual relationships. Importantly, none of the young people mentioned the classroom as a space where their understanding of consent had been formed, although Ari's 'respectful relationships' on her mind map suggests some classroom education.

The discussion then turned to the participants' experience of consent education in school. We asked if the terms that they had written and used were what they had learned in class, and the response from Samantha and Ari was an astounding and forceful 'no'. Both of them laughed afterwards, perhaps surprised at the immediacy of their response. It became evident that they were expecting to learn about consent in a general subject where, according to Samantha, students were taught 'wellbeing, but also like, how to get a job and stuff'. According to the school's website, this three-year-long program is designed to foster social and emotional development and includes a focus on personal safety and personal relationship building. Samantha and Ari, however, were unsatisfied with the consent education they were receiving. The lessons did not include enough detail about consent or sexuality more broadly. Samantha said they 'watch the tea video once a year, and that's the extent of consent here, man'. This is a reference to a two-minute video called *Consent: It's as simple as tea* (Blue Seat Studios, 2015) that equates gaining sexual consent with offering a guest a cup of tea. With over 10 million views on YouTube, it simplifies consent by suggesting that if someone does not want a cup of tea, you simply 'don't make them drink tea, don't get annoyed at them for not wanting tea'. In a similar vein as Adams's (2021) work with participants who discussed the video in research

about rape culture on campus, the participants felt that this video 'was inadequate regarding fostering open dialogue' about consent (p. 8). Ari and Samantha suggested that the video presented a very limited demonstration of giving or gaining consent.

Samantha was concerned that using a resource like the tea video minimised the seriousness of the issue. She said that 'everyone just laughs at it the whole time' and that 'the boys here just can't take consent seriously'. She acknowledged that she too makes fun of the video despite taking consent seriously: 'But I'll be honest, I make jokes about it too. Like out of nowhere I'll be like, do you want tea? Like, as a joke'. At this point, Ari and Samantha shared a few jokes they regularly made using the tea video, such as saying 'I won't pour tea down your throat, it's okay'. The participants' response to the tea video and its use in class suggests that at least one of the resources teachers are using to create dialogue in the classroom is perceived as damaging students' understanding of consent. Instead of fostering a deeper understanding, the tea video is perceived as humorous. Furthermore, Ari and Samantha's feeling that they were not receiving adequate consent education in their wellbeing subject demonstrates the need for broader opportunities to tackle this topic across curricular.

Even among the three participants, however, opinions on consent education at their school were not unanimous. Jess did not share the others' belief that the teaching on consent was 'not good'. She acknowledged that her experience was 'totally different' because she felt 'there's been quite a bit of consent in the classes' she had been in. When Jess suggested that they had been taught about consent, Samantha responded with the question 'do you not listen in class?' This implies that if Jess did listen, she would have realised there was no discussion of consent. Undeterred, Jess said, 'I honestly think that consent education here is pretty good, or that I've experienced', and repeated this statement towards the end of the focus group as well.

This initial conversation highlights the complex nature of curriculum design for consent education. Mandating the inclusion of consent education in the curriculum has been a major step forward in addressing the recent calls for improved sex education in secondary schools; however, as this conversation shows, the way that curriculum is implemented varies not only between schools or across year levels, but between classrooms following the same lesson plans. Similarly, the participants identified different responses to a single teaching resource. We note too that the Catholic

identity of this school may be further complicating the implementation of consent education, as the school must also navigate the Church's attitudes to sex and young people. While we cannot make generalisations about students' responses to the tea video, nor can we be sure that this is the only material presented, this research suggests that the broader student population may have similarly diverse responses. Thus, this research demonstrates the need for more opportunities to engage in this topic organically, in different classes and at different ages.

Critical literacy of consent in young adult fantasy

During the focus groups, the young people discussed specific narrative moments in *Red queen*, *A court of thorns and roses (ACOTAR)*, *Valentine* and *Legendborn*, four YA texts introduced below. The discourse analysis of the discussion demonstrates the girls' nuanced understanding of key facets of consent and sexual relationships. In particular, their discussion centres around: unequal power relationships between characters and how this influences one's ability to consent; the presence of language that emphasises the protagonist's desire and sexuality; and holding people accountable for their behaviour in relationships. We argue that these novels, while not featuring explicit commentary on consent, could be used to develop a deeper understanding of consent. This research demonstrates the importance of providing students with textual examples of relationships and opportunities to develop a critical literacy of consent in the English classroom.

In *Red queen*, the protagonist Mare is taken prisoner by the royal family because they are afraid of her supernatural powers. As a 'Red'-blooded person, Mare is not supposed to have such abilities, but an anomaly has given her the power to create and control electricity. The royal family are supernatural 'Silvers', who have distinct silver blood and can control various aspects of nature. Silvers are the ruling class and subjugate all Reds. While in the palace, the King gives Mare a false identity as a Silver to hide from the public the possibility that Reds can have powers, and she is betrothed to Prince Maven. However, Mare soon develops feelings for both royal princes: Cal, the heir to the throne, and Maven, his younger brother. The discussion focused on the first kiss between Cal and Mare, which occurs while he is teaching Mare to dance before a big royal ball.

Initially, the participants asserted that there was 'no consent' between Cal and Mare. However, more nuance quickly entered the conversation as the girls grappled with the power imbalance between the two characters. Samantha stated that: '[Mare], like, initially says 'I can't do this', and I know it's a trope (that like, they're gonna do it anyway), but that's not consent. And also, in her mind, she literally wants to pull away'. This short statement from Samantha reveals a much more complex understanding of consent than her initial simple statement that 'there's no consent'. First, by referencing a trope, Samantha highlights how there are expected scripts for girls in these interactions, and that saying you 'can't do' something can be read, by both the reader and Cal, as part of the romantic plot line. Second, Samantha draws attention to Mare's lack of consent when Mare says 'I can't' and 'back[s] away' (Aveyard, 2015, p. 227), noting that she 'want[s] to pull away' (Aveyard, 2015, p. 228). In her interpretation of the scene, Samantha is emphasising the role of verbal consent in intimate interactions and claiming that no matter how words are said, or how they might be interpreted as part of the moment, they need to be taken literally. Finally, Samantha alludes to Mare's internal narration as highlighting that she does not want the kiss to take place. This narration, Samantha astutely observes, refers to the 'internal state of willingness' (Muehlenhard et al., 2016, p. 462) required for consent to be present.

Both Jess and Ari felt that consent was complicated because of the power imbalance between Cal as a prince and heir to the kingdom and Mare as a servant being forced to lie about her identity. Jess felt that Mare was hesitant not because she was not attracted to him or did not want to kiss him, but because of the 'court shit' and the 'political stuff' happening in the text. She explains that 'I don't think it's kind of, like, um, like, very consensual or very not consensual' since 'Mare had the chance to pull away' and that 'while she said she didn't want to' it wasn't like she was 'panicked or anything'. Although Cal should have 'checked a bit', Jess did not 'think he did anything necessarily wrong in that moment'. Here Jess is interpreting Mare's behaviours as demonstrating 'willingness' despite the internal narration that might indicate otherwise, highlighting the difficulties of interpreting consenting behaviour identified by Beres (2014). This clearly demonstrates the need for more nuanced consent education to help young people develop the language to identify, and even critique for themselves, behaviours that would indicate appropriate consent.

Ari noted that there was a 'power imbalance' and that Mare 'has no power in either situation' because both Cal and Maven are 'very high above her'. This comment implied that Mare had no ability to consent because she was of a much lower social status, as Graf and Johnson (2021) suggest. The participants were asked to think through the complexity a bit more deeply. The question was posed by [Author 1]: 'if there's a power imbalance, and she's saying no verbally, but she has internal feelings for him, how does that impact her ability to consent?' At this point in the transcript there is a noted pause, with 'pens scratching on paper' before Jess says 'Um' and there's another pause. It was clearly a complex issue to negotiate. [Author 2] framed it in a different way, and asked them if they thought Mare would have been punished is she said no and refused to kiss either Maven or Cal. To this, Jess, Samantha and Ari all responded with a clear 'yes'. Ari noted that Mare might have thought that if she did not kiss Maven she 'would be dead', and as Cal is the heir to the throne Mare might have thought she 'had to do [it]'. Yet in the very next sentence, Ari maintained that 'at the moment' she still 'could have consented' to Cal. Samantha similarly circled back and said she thinks 'both [kisses] were consensual' or at least 'more dubious' than simply saying no consent. Ari interjected suggesting 'the consent is iffy'. And then Ari circled back again, saying that if Mare 'really feels that kind of pressure to do it, to say yes, which she *kind* of did, because of the power struggle, that's not *really* consent'.

Despite clearly articulating the power differential between Cal and Mare, and identifying that she verbally declined to kiss him, the participants could not agree on whether this narrative moment represented true consent or not. As this discussion highlights, there were many 'ifs' and 'buts' to their conversation, and they contradicted their own definitions of consent. The discussion of this particular scene demonstrates the importance of providing young people with narrative examples of power imbalances with relationships. They clearly wrestled with how power was constituted in this relationship and how that influenced Mare's ability to actively consent. The nuance they brought to their understanding of Mare's autonomy, and how this developed through the conversation, shows how complex discussions of consent can be when students are given a prompt that allows exploration.

ACOTAR, the first book in a YA fantasy series by Sarah J. Maas (2015), follows the story of Feyre, who is held captive in the Spring Court by the High Fae Lord Tamlin after killing one of his soldiers. In this adaptation of the 'Beauty and the Beast' fairytale, the romantic relationship that develops between Feyre and her captor is the solution to breaking the curse placed on Tamlin and his court. In an important scene between Feyre and Tamlin that occurs during a faerie festival, he grabs her and kisses her despite her saying no. The participants unanimously agreed that this did not represent consent:

Ari: That's literally him going against consent. and the next chapter, it's always made me mad, even when I first read it, he, he says, ah, it's not my fault, she should have done – is what – she should have just stayed inside. Like, no, she said no, explicitly, you need to recognise that.

Jess: Yeah. I feel similar – that it was very clear that, like, she didn't want it, but he was just like, no, I'll do what I want.

Samantha: Yeah, it's not consent.

Because Feyre explicitly refuses to give consent to Tamlin, the young people were unequivocal that the scene had to be understood as nonconsensual, reflecting the focus on affirmative consent in contemporary consent campaigns. At the same time, however, they acknowledged how the focalisation through Feyre gave them access to her internal mental state, which was less explicit in rejecting him because she was sexually attracted to him. For Jess, her explicit 'no' outweighs her physical attraction. However, Ari attempts to work through Feyre's physical attraction alongside the explicit rejection of this sexual encounter:

Jess: If she was, always said no and tries to push him away, that is explicitly her saying no, even if then her physical response still encourages him.

Ari: She could just be, because she'd had her, maybe she was, I don't remember, was she crushing on him back then or not? It's Feyre, yeah, it's like her, because her crush is literally kissing her, she's trying to say no, but like, her body's got a bit of a mind of its own, I guess.

Jess: I don't think, like even in, um, like you can't necessarily control your body anyway.

Ari: She's in two minds, maybe. So at the same time, she's feeling like the romance, she's feeling the [makes a sexual noise]. But at the same time, she's like, no, I don't want, I don't want this happening. It's not not consent.

The girls' syntax here is telling. This is a complicated

moment for them, and their understanding of the 'definition' of consent lies in tension with Feyre's physical response in this moment. *ACOTAR* is different from *Red queen* in that the sexuality is more explicit, and Feyre is depicted as a desiring young women. She is 'crushing' on Tamlin, so Ari believes that perhaps her body has 'a mind of its own', yet simultaneously she is 'explicitly saying no'. This scene provides a nuanced example of a response that is not black and white, and that led to an interesting and complex discussion about consent. Indeed, the double negative 'not not consent' shows the discomfort in identifying the interaction as either nonconsensual or consensual, and highlights the tension that young people face in considering relationship dynamics like these.

The third text we discussed with the participants, Jodi McAlister's *Valentine* (2017), is an Australian fairy tale set in a small rural town where Pearl and Finn grapple with Finn's identity as fae as they try and keep him safe from his evil faerie family. The novel features a significant consent breach when Pearl learns that Finn is able to access her dreams and has been doing so without her knowledge or permission even as they were beginning to develop a romantic relationship. Finn attempts to justify his behaviour by explaining that he has no control over visiting her dreams, which Jess rejects 'as a bit of an excuse, like people can say that all the time, oh, sorry, I had no control over what I was doing'. Jess also praises Pearl's response to the breach of consent, saying it was 'good that she like explicitly says to him, you shouldn't have done this'. She notes that '[frank discussions about consent are] probably a bit unusual, though I have seen it before'.

Jess and Ari both indicate that Finn's behaviour is unacceptable and that he should not be immediately forgiven, although they both support the possibility of a future relationship between the two protagonists. Jess felt that Pearl's response was 'quite good, like she was angry, but you know, eventually still willing to work things out. I mean, which like, she didn't have to be, but yeah, I don't know, I just felt it was handled quite well'. Ari immediately concurred and added 'I don't think she should forgive him straight away, because she didn't'. Unlike the discussion of *ACOTAR*, in which the participants felt that Tamlin's behaviour was unacceptable, here they suggest here that Finn could be forgiven for his behaviour provided he accepted responsibility for his actions and did not invade Pearl's dreams without permission again. The stakes of this breach of consent did not seem as

serious to them, although they indicated that some instances can be discussed to achieve a resolution that is mutually acceptable. It could be that they were less critical of Finn's breach of consent because it does not carry the same sexual connotations as Tamlin's in *ACOTAR*. Regardless, given the complexities around consent education and the need to interpret behaviour, ongoing discussion is an important feature of positive consent education that the participants are reflecting on here.

Our final discussion centred on Tracy Deonn's *Legendborn* (2020), an Arthurian legend reimagining that features a Black female protagonist and is set in an American college. Bree joins the Legendborn, a group of demon-fighting teenagers who protect the campus, and falls in love with Nick, the heir-apparent to Arthur's throne. One evening after fighting demons, the two share their first kiss, before which Nick says, 'I'd *really* like to kiss you' (Deonn, 2020, p. 215). Bree's response is 'Oh', and Nick confirms, 'Oh, "no"? Or oh, "yes"?' (p. 215). As soon as she responds in the affirmative, he kisses her. Although brief, we raised this interaction with the participants to see how they thought it represented consent. Ari noted to begin that normally 'it's not sexy to say, can I kiss you now', yet decided after rereading the scene during the focus group that the conversation [between Nick and Bree] made Nick 'even more attractive!'. She said it 'was nice' and demonstrated 'what a scene could do' if an author decided to depict consent intentionally. Jess noted that it was 'very clear consent and they're both happy', with Samantha agreeing. Importantly, Samantha highlight that by asking Bree, Nick is 'giving her the control'. While a power imbalance exists, with Nick as Arthur's heir, in that moment 'they both have control … he's like actively like asked her … and I feel like that kind of gets rid of the power imbalance'. Despite the interaction between Nick and Bree spanning only a few short sentences, this discussion highlighted the importance of including positive representations of consent. Ultimately, the girls' engagement with the various complexities of consent presented in the four novels discussed highlights the potential of using narratives for developing a critical literacy of consent.

Conclusion

This research highlights the need to include young people in discussions of consent in order to develop more robust, nuanced understandings. The participants in our study were critical of the current consent education

to which they had been exposed and had difficulty defining consent as anything more than its affirmative elements. Yet our discussion of consent in relation to YA fantasy fiction demonstrates the possibilities posed by including books that have different depictions of romantic and sexual relationships. While we do not argue that classrooms need to include YA fantasy novels, by discussing these popular books with teen readers, we demonstrate the positive potential of including in English classrooms books that feature varying examples of consent.

The participants' readings of these novels reflect the complexity of applying consent to relationship dynamics, which is a key contribution that English classrooms can offer to consent education. The language the girls used to define consent contrasted with the terms they used to unpack scenes of intimacy. This clearly indicates the added complexity that discussing fiction can incorporate into consent education. Creating a critical literacy of consent can take sexuality education from awkward metaphors and textbook scenarios to 'lived' experiences while maintaining the safety of fiction. English classrooms thus have the potential to generate rich, textured and nuanced discussions of consent and its complexities through the incorporation of relevant, engaging texts.

Notes

1   Deakin University (#2022-229) and Catholic Education Melbourne (CEM) Research Office (#1236).

2   For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, pseudonyms were chosen by the participants and have been used in this article.

3   BookTube and BookTok are terms that refer to reading communities on social media spaces such as YouTube, TikTok and Instagram.

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Student Voice, Choice, and Agency:
The Benefits of Co-designing English Curriculum

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Abstract: This article is a practitioner reflection exploring the rationale for co-designing curriculums with students in the secondary English classroom. Co-design is presented as a collaborative approach in which teachers and students cooperate to choose which texts will be studied for the year. Key elements of co-design include: providing space; facilitating student voice; listening actively; and acting on student input. I share my experience of co-designing a Year 11 International Baccalaureate Language and Literature course and explains how students actively participated in designing the curriculum, resulting in a combination of their collective and individual voices. The benefits of co-design, such as increased student engagement and relevance, are discussed, along with the challenges it may present, including planning considerations and social elements. The article concludes by suggesting the potential for this co-design approach to be adapted to other educational systems, and emphasising its capacity to create a more inclusive, student-centred and critical English curriculum.

Keywords: student voice, text choice, English curriculum, co-design

Introduction

Planning what to teach and how to teach it is one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching high school English. Whenever a new text garners literary acclaim it is common for English teachers to ponder how it might fit in their curriculums. However, deciding which texts to set can depend on myriad complex and competing factors. Subject English has long grappled with the question of how best to plan curriculum for students, from the five models of English teaching outlined in the Cox Report (1991) – personal growth, cross-curricular, adult needs, cultural heritage and cultural analysis – to contemporary calls for English teachers to plan with diversity and inclusion in mind (Little & Aglinskas, 2022). Although these models can form a useful starting point for teachers' planning, conceptualising subject English solely in terms of such models limits teacher autonomy and overlooks the interconnected nature of English teaching. Furthermore, some models, such as the cultural heritage model (Cox, 1991), may prioritise voices that are already dominant within the curriculum. The usefulness of models in guiding the planning of curriculums is also limited by the practical reality of teaching: that is, what books do we already have on hand?

Planning is something that teachers take very seriously, with course design representing one of the creative delights of the job. However, presenting students with an engaging course list featuring challenging texts that will enable them to make sense of their complex worlds remains a persistent challenge. Teachers must contend with the need to ensure that their curriculums meet the conditions of the syllabus; budgetary limitations can dampen even the most eager innovator's enthusiasm; the cultural context of the school community must be considered; and, vitally, teachers must consider the needs of their students.

Perhaps most commonly, planning involves reflecting on what has been done before to guide what will be done in the future. Did Judith Wright work for Year 11 poetry, or should we switch her out for Luka Lesson? *Romeo and Juliet* or *Othello* for Year 10? These imagined questions imply that teachers are agential and working either individually or in teams to make decisions about their courses. Of course, this is not always the case. Many teachers 'inherit' courses without having the option to change them.

Despite the many ways in which teachers can approach planning, generally, students are left out of the conversation. Although decisions might be made to support students (for example, 'our kids will like this text' or 'this class would work well with this play') the common logic assumes that teachers are the main decision-makers. Indeed, the responsibility is on the teacher to ensure that syllabus requirements are met, that the course is rich and engaging and allows students to develop their understanding of language, literature and literacy, and that the texts are culturally suitable for our young people. English teachers work hard to use their creativity and experience to ensure that all of these conditions are satisfied.

However, another less-explored option is to involve students in the planning of the course. While co-designing can be done in a number of ways, from taking a shortlist of texts to students for consultation to engaging them in designing the course collaboratively, in this article I offer a reflection of my experiences of working with my students to co-design a Year 11 International Baccalaureate (IB) Language and Literature course in Queensland, Australia.

I begin the article by considering definitions of student voice, agency and choice, and arguing for their importance. I then explore definitions of co-design before outlining the process I undertook with my students, and the benefits of such an approach. The challenges of co-designing curriculums are acknowledged, as well as reflections on what I would do differently next time. I argue that co-designing curriculums both offers opportunities for education for democracy and allows students to choose texts that help them grow. I conclude with suggestions for using co-design principles in other educational systems, including the Queensland Senior Curriculum.

What are the requirements for choosing which texts to study in Queensland Senior English?

In Queensland, where this article was written, the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) sets prescribed lists of texts for the three English senior syllabuses: English, English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Literature. The list includes texts from a range of genres, including plays, film and television, poetry and non-fiction, and texts are reviewed every three years, with input from teachers, students and parents sought via an online forum (QCAA, 2021). In Year 11, students must study at least three texts, which can be freely chosen but must conform to genre conventions, while in Year 12 they must study at least four texts from the prescribed text list, with the final unit culminating in an external assessment based on the texts studied (QCAA, 2024). For the English General senior syllabus in 2024, those texts were:

- *Burial Rites* – Hannah Kent
- *Macbeth* – William Shakespeare
- *Never Let Me Go* – Kazuo Ishiguro
- *Othello* – William Shakespeare
- *Pride and Prejudice* – Jane Austen
- *The White Earth* – Andrew McGahan
- *The Yield* – Tara June Winch
- *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* – Karen Joy Fowler

Over the two-year course of study, students complete three formative assessments, three internal assessments and one external assessment, all equally weighted and based on the texts studied in class.

I have provided the above explanation of the Queensland English General Syllabus as a comparison to not only highlight why the IB Diploma Programme provides unique opportunities which align with co-designing principles, but also show how a similar approach could be adopted in broader educational contexts, which I will detail in a later section of this article. The IB Diploma Programme is an internationally recognised two-year course in which students undertake the study of six curriculum subjects, plus the 'core' subjects of Extended Essay, Theory of Knowledge and Creativity, Activity, Service. Students undertake each IB subject at either Higher Level or Standard Level. There are currently 80 schools in Australia offering the IB Diploma Programme, thirteen of which are in Queensland. Similar to the Queensland state system, IB Language and Literature has requirements that must be met regarding which texts can be studied. At Higher Level, which is the course my students studied, students must study six literary texts representing a

minimum of three different periods, three different genres and three different locations over two years (IBO, 2019). Students also study an equal number of non-literary bodies of work, such as speeches, political cartoons, artworks and advertising. A minimum of four of the six literary works studied must come from the Prescribed Reading List (PRL), and two must be texts in translation. Two works can be chosen freely, and there are no stipulations about where the non-literary works are sourced from. The PRL comprises 145 male and 146 female authors and features authors from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe (IBO, 2019).

Unlike the QCAA Queensland General English Syllabus, external assessment in IB is much more heavily weighted. While IB students complete four summative assessments, like their counterparts in the state curriculum, only one is internally assessed (but externally moderated): the Individual Oral, worth 20% of their grade and based on a literary and non-literary text chosen by the student. The Higher Level Essay is also worth 20% and based on a literary or non-literary text chosen by the student, and is prepared in class but externally assessed. The syllabus states that 'Studies in language and literature courses require a high level of agency on the part of the students regarding the preparation of their work for the assessment components' (IBO, 2019, p. 30), and students may choose freely from the texts studied in class for their assessment. The external exams, Paper 1 and Paper 2, are worth 35% and 25% respectively, with Paper 2 sharing some similarities with Queensland General English's External Assessment task in that it is an unseen essay on a literary text, although the Language and Literature students complete a comparative response and the texts need not come from the prescribed list of authors.

The two systems share similarities in that teachers can choose texts freely for some parts of the course while other choices must be guided by a text list. While the IB Language and Literature course enables more variety and freedom in choosing texts for assessment purposes, the English General syllabus still provides much scope for co-design.

Why is it important for teachers to consider a range of texts in their text selection?

Current scholarship on text choice urges teachers to consider a range of texts in order to better represent their school communities, and to disrupt power structures which privilege White heteronormative stories. Worrell (2022) asks teachers to consider which voices are silenced and privileged in curriculums, noting that attempts to include Indigenous texts often lead to the inclusion of texts written by White authors featuring Indigenous characters rather than consistently prioritising Indigenous knowledges. She urges teachers to consider how text choices disempower Indigenous peoples, and to 'consider questions of power, voice, and signification' (Worrell, 2022, p. 13) when planning courses to disrupt the White domination of education that disempowers Indigenous peoples. McGraw and van Leent (2018) argue that the English General text list in Queensland privileges heteronormativity by featuring very few texts with queer representation, or representation that is marginal at best and can be overlooked by teachers. They posit that the authoritative voice of a text list could work to systemically empower teachers to incorporate LGBTQIA+ texts, leading to more equitable and diverse experiences for students (McGraw & van Leent, 2018).

The possibility of creating English curriculums that expose students to diverse opinions is explored by Little and Aglinskas (2022), who propose using a text diversity audit to empower staff to create more diverse text lists. Their study found that students believed it was important to study diverse voices in the classroom, and that they felt better prepared for the future for having done so. McKnight (2018) cautions against paying 'lip service to inclusion' (p. 9) as 'simply setting diverse texts cannot ensure that teachers support their messages [or] that students may not resist and reject them' (p. 10), highlighting that a top-down approach to curriculum development may have some unintended consequences. Drawing on Reid (1984), McKnight (2018) argues that students should have opportunities to pull apart texts and explore language in 'a process that values their differences and posits them as collaborators and artists' (p. 13). Further, she uses Garth Boomer's (1992) negotiated curriculum to ask 'what [students] want to know and what they have to offer as co-designers of pedagogies' (McKnight, 2018, p. 13). Asking these questions will help teachers work towards true inclusion and critical engagement with diversity rather than following a tick-a-box approach (McKnight, 2018). The literature makes it clear that although there is work to be done regarding using text lists to promote diversity, including students as co-designers can be a more authentically inclusive way of developing an English course that serves the needs of the students.

Understanding student agency, voice, and active citizenship

Underpinning any attempt to shift the task of planning from something teachers do *for* students to something students do *with* teachers is a belief in the importance of student voice and student agency. Although the terms voice and agency are often used interchangeably, Gillett-Swan and Brodie-McKenzie (2022) differentiate voice as a student's right to be involved in decision-making, while agency is their power to act within the classroom. As such, adults can control the conditions in which voice and agency are exercised, with teachers and schools positioning students as participants in rather than creators of their education.

In Australia, education has been framed as 'an individual commodity rather than a collective good, in which individuals are encouraged to compete in an entrepreneurial manner for access to educational opportunities' (Riddle & Heffernan, 2018, p. 321). However, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Education Council, 2019) explicitly states that its goal is for Australian students to be 'active and informed members of the community' (p. 4) who 'understand their responsibilities as global citizens and know how to affect positive change' (p. 5). In order to do this, schools need to move away from individualistic modes of teaching, and instead focus on providing opportunities for students to exercise their democratic muscles by practising decision-making, forming arguments, engaging in productive dialogues and hearing different perspectives, all of which can be achieved in the English classroom (Elwell, 2022).

In order to value student voice and agency, work towards the goals of the Mparntwe Education Declaration and equip students for an increasingly complex globalised world, education needs to support young people to act together as agential enactors of democracy (Riddle & Heffernan, 2018). To do this, schools can involve students in decision-making in a way that values them as an important part of the community with relevant knowledge and skills to offer (Bessant et al., 2016). Recognising the agency of young people and facilitating inclusive opportunities for them to value active citizenship and feel a responsibility for the collective rather than the individual is a responsibility we bear as educators (Riddle & Heffernan, 2018). Co-designing curriculums is a simple and achievable way to work towards a more democratic and inclusive vision for education. And arguably most importantly, co-design creates something unique and memorable, which may foster a classroom culture of ownership and belonging.

How can co-design in the English classroom amplify student voice?

Having explored some of the influences underpinning how English courses are planned and arguing for the need to create the conditions for students to exercise agency and have their voices heard, I now turn to discussing how co-design can meet this need. Co-designing curriculums involves taking a collaborative approach to planning in which teachers and students are treated equally and share responsibility for the outcomes, which can lead to all participants feeling a sense of ownership over decisions (Dollinger & D'Angelo, 2020). Co-creation can involve co-designing what is taught before it is taught, or how the program will be taught during the course of study (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019), which might come in response to feedback such as students saying that they enjoy certain types of activities. In both cases, in order for co-design to work, the power relationship between teachers and students must be acknowledged and subverted; otherwise, it will be the case that teachers are 'letting' students have a voice rather than students actually having an authentic voice. Lundy (2007) proposes four key elements necessary for co-design to work:

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views.
- Audience: The view must be listened to.
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate (p. 933).

If these conditions are met, then interest in the curriculum can be enhanced for students, because co-design means greater ownership (Bessant et al., 2016; Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; Bovill et al., 2020; Gillett-Swan & Brodie-McKenzie, 2022). Furthermore, co-designing can be a way to include diverse perspectives (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; Dollinger & D'Angelo, 2020), and makes 'learning and teaching processes more transparent for everyone' (Bovill et al., 2020, p. 37). Inviting students into the process of designing curriculums honours their perspectives, takes their opinions seriously and provides the opportunity for them to increase their understanding of what they are being asked to do in assessment (Dollinger & D'Angelo, 2020). Furthermore, it aids in the development of

critical thinking and decision-making skills, reflective thinking, and metacognitive awareness of learning processes (Dollinger & D'Angelo, 2020).

There is a clear alignment between co-design and critical education approaches such as critical literacy, as they both involve critiquing power structures. Critical literacy approaches can also be a way to develop active citizenship, as student voice can be central to discussions on how groups can be empowered or disempowered by texts, with student experiences being amplified rather than kept to the margins (Alford & Kettle, 2017). Co-designing curriculums creates the appropriate conditions for critical literacy approaches, as for critical literacy to be authentically critical, classroom environments cannot be traditional or students may end up simply parroting what they think the teacher wishes to hear (Keddie, 2008) in the 'banking model' style of education critiqued by Freire (1972), in which critical literacy becomes just another piece of knowledge to learn and perform.

If critical literacy is about challenging the status quo in texts as a way to encourage action beyond the classroom (Leska, 2016), then we need to provide opportunities for students to experience such action and growth. But if we are expecting students to do the work of deconstructing power relationships and then suggesting that they take this beyond the classroom, why don't we start in the classroom first? Indeed, Janks (2014) argues that critical approaches to education help teachers 'to name and interrogate our practices in order to change them' (p. 349), and that 'education has a responsibility to develop students' sense of agency' (p. 354). I argue that this sense of agency can be better supported by students being active co-creators of their learning and by moving away from the positioning of teachers as the holders of all knowledge and students as passive recipients, and that this can be achieved through co-designing curriculums. In the following section, I outline how a co-design approach can satisfy these many demands, from incorporating more diverse voices in the classroom to destabilising power structures that inhibit student voice and agency, to providing the conditions for active citizenship.

My practitioner reflection: The rationale behind co-designing a Year 11 English course

McKnight (2020) offered the provocation 'What would a curriculum written by a student be like?' (p. 63), and in the following section I provide the answer to that question based on my experience.

The following sections explore how I implemented a co-design approach with my Year 11 Language and Literature class. I do not wish to offer my experience as a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and recognise that my teaching context in an IB senior high school with motivated students means that it is not universal. As a Head of Department, I also acknowledge that I have more freedoms than teachers when it comes to implementing curriculum change. However, I offer the following account as a starting point for teachers wishing to do this work. Firstly, I outline the rationale for taking this approach in my context. I then explain how I implemented this process with my students, before concluding with reflections and implications for educators.

The context and application

Schools teaching the IB engage with the pedagogical framework of its six Approaches to Teaching (ATT) and five Approaches to Learning skills, which function similarly to the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum in that they are skills and strategies intended to apply across all subjects in order to prepare students for the future. As my school was focusing on the ATT of 'inquiry-based teaching' as one of our strategic priorities, I read Trevor MacKenzie's book *Dive into inquiry* (2019) prior to the 2023 school year and made the decision that I would follow his model for co-designing curriculum with my Year 11 Language and Literature class. MacKenzie advocates for a process in which, on the first day of school, he asks students what they wish to study for the year, and from there they design their course (MacKenzie, 2019).

While eager to try this approach, I knew that there would be a few challenges in my context – namely, limited resources. While my school does have a reasonable variety of texts in its book-room, the budget is not infinite by any means, and I knew that compromises would have to be made by students. Their voices might be heard, but my ability to offer the students true agency was hampered by working within the constraints of budget requirements. I also did not know the interests, abilities, social dynamics or reading habits of my class beyond what I could glean from previous academic reports and the comments of other teachers, so I did not know whether the class would cohere or clash.

On the first day of the academic year, I told my students that we were going to plan our course together. Students responded with curiosity and excitement,

eagerly organising themselves into groups to begin the process. I gave students information on the general aims of the course, and a list of all the texts already owned by the school, with the note that we could try to buy more if what they wanted was not on the list. They were given butcher's paper and access to resources, and could work at table groups of their choice. They had two 60-minute periods to research in before presenting their dream courses to the rest of the class.

Students were given the following task:

Working in your table groups, you are going to design your dream Language & Literature course for Year 11. Using the materials in this pack, work together to ensure that you meet all the requirements of the course. You will present your dream course to the class in an effort to persuade them that your course design is the best! Our final course design will be a combination of what you have all presented. Course requirements:

- 6 literary texts. You must have a mix of different genres, periods, authors must come from different locations, and a mix of gender and racial diversity.
- 6 non-literary bodies of work. A body of work means a collection of works by the same author.
- Justify why you should study these texts and explain what ideas you would explore.

I made it clear that we would need to work together as a class to make compromises, and that I would take their wish lists and compile them into the definitive course list. The students seemed excited and interested in this process, although some groups were overwhelmed with many ideas, while others said they did not read much so it was harder for them to decide on text choices. I encouraged them to research the text options we already had and to focus on the ideas they wanted to explore, because that would help me compile their wish lists into a coherent curriculum.

While the students were working, I moved around the classroom and spoke to them about their text choices. It was a great way for me to start to get to know their individual tastes and how they worked together as a class; I could already see which students would need to be stretched and which students might need a bit more support. Students also got to talk to me about the novels they loved, which meant that we were starting out the year on a positive note rather than commencing by going through all the assessment tasks they would eventually have to complete. While in some contexts students might be resistant to such activities because of the uncertainty created by the

power role reversal (Hsu et al., 2023), my students were eager to contribute. I worried that they might find doing this task, which is usually a teacher's job, a bit boring, but perhaps they could see that they were being affirmed as agents of their own learning (Bessant et al., 2016), as engagement in the planning lessons was high. Crucially, the process established a democratic dynamic in the classroom and began the process of building relationships between all members of the classroom.

When each group presented its course wish lists to the class, it was magic. Students asked questions of each other, naturally starting to build a classroom community, and I paid attention to which texts seemed popular with students. I then took their course wish lists and compiled them a cohesive plan. This was the point at which I had to make some decisions as a teacher. Some of the options suggested by students were not complex enough for the requirements of the assessment, and I had to fill some genre gaps to ensure the course requirements would be met. I felt worried about trying to cater for everyone's wishes, and as one group in particular had chosen many texts that were not very suitable for the rigours of the course, I was concerned they might feel left out when many of their texts did not make the final cut.

With all of this in mind, I started with the ideas that students wanted to explore and put them into a word cloud. Resoundingly, the two biggest ideas were 'gender' and 'power', followed by 'queer' and 'class'. I was surprised that students were not interested in exploring any texts related to environmental issues, as I know many students of this age group are passionate about climate change, but this is why this co-designing is so powerful: I have to teach the students I have, not the students I may want. I used these key ideas of gender, power, queer and class to guide the rest of my planning. I quickly realised that due to the range of texts suggested by the students, if I were to compile a list based on their choices it would mean choosing some texts over others, and while I felt confident that I could create a course that would be enjoyable, it would not be a reflection of their collective and individual voices.

To solve this dilemma, I designed each unit as a multiple-choice unit, where students could choose from multiple texts organised around the same idea and inquiry question. A colleague of mine had started doing multiple-choice Gothic fiction units in her Year 10 course with great success, so I knew many of my

students would be primed for this approach. I then compiled the course as follows:

Unit 1: Consumerism & class
Inquiry question: How do media representations of class and consumerism reinforce or challenge dominant social norms and values?
Texts: *Parasite* film, Cadbury ads, photography by Lauren Greenfield, art by Shepard Fairey.

Unit 2: Gender
Inquiry question: How do gender roles and expectations impact individuals and society?
Texts: Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy OR Grace Nichols, *The virgin suicide*s film, art by Elisabetta Sirani and Andrea Kowch, photographs by Eli Rezkallah.

Unit 3: Politics & power
Inquiry question: How do the representations of politics and power in non-literary texts challenge societal views and power dynamics?
Texts: First Dog on the Moon cartoons, speeches by Stan Grant, photography by Dorothea Lange.

Unit 4: Love
Inquiry question: How does social class impact the portrayal and experience of love in literature?
Texts: *Pride and prejudice* by Jane Austen OR *The song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller AND *All about love* by bell hooks, and selected episodes of *Black mirror* (TV show).

Unit 5: Identity & resistance
Inquiry question: How does literature explore themes of identity, power and resistance in the face of oppressive systems?
Texts: Art by Boris Groh, Charlotte Allingham and Roxana Halls, *The yield* by Tara June Winch, *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *The handmaid's tale* by Margaret Atwood, *Animal farm* by George Orwell OR *Burial rites* by Hannah Kent

Unit 6: Individual versus society
Inquiry questions: How does literature represent how to navigate the conflict between societal norms and individuals' inner desires?
Texts: Selected episodes of *Black mirror* (TV show), short stories by Franz Kafka or Edgar Allan Poe, OR *No longer human* by Osamu Dazai.

When I presented the course to the students, I wanted to make sure that I was showing them that I had taken their views seriously by explaining my decision-making process (Lundy, 2007). This meant explaining why I had included some texts over others, and clarifying why I had chosen to include some texts that the students had not chosen (i.e., because I knew they needed more literary options that would be rich enough for their assessments). In doing so, I could see that in some ways, I was limiting their agency by regulating the situations in which voice and agency could be enacted (Gillett-Swan & Brodie-McKenzie, 2022), while simultaneously creating the conditions for voice to be valued. The response from students was overwhelmingly positive. They seemed interested in the explanation and were not visibly disappointed if their group's texts were not chosen. They seemed shocked and surprised that their voices had been heard, and there were cheers when I revealed certain texts. I also emailed parents the course lists and received positive feedback, including that their students were excited about the course.

It certainly felt as though the class was a coherent collective, and the conditions for active citizenship had been met as democracy involves compromise. Most importantly, there was a feeling of responsibility for the collective rather than the individual (Riddle & Heffernan, 2018), which persisted as the year progressed. Through amplifying their voice, students gained a sense of ownership over their course and further opportunities for meaningful decision-making through multiple-choice units.

Reflections and considerations for future courses
At the conclusion of our final unit for the year, I asked students to reflect on what they enjoyed about our co-design project and what they thought I should do differently next time. As this is a practitioner reflection and not a formal study, I have not included verbatim responses, as ethical clearance was not sought. However, my reflection is that the student responses were very positive, with three themes evident: co-design led to greater freedom, engagement and relevancy. Students commented that they really enjoyed being able to study texts that they had chosen, and that this increased their motivation when it came to working on assessment. As the Individual Oral and Higher Level Essay both require students to make their own choices regarding text selection and lines of inquiry, having many relevant options for students to choose from was very helpful for them. Interestingly, many students reported that their favourite unit was

the love unit, as they enjoyed studying subject matter that they found relevant to their lives.

When I compare data on student performance, I can also see a marked improvement in performance from a formative oral task with a set text to the summative oral with an own-choice text. To scaffold the formative task, students all studied the same literary and non-literary texts, which led to orals with minimal variation, enabling the students to learn the skills but stifling originality. The top marks band in the marking criteria for the spoken element of the Individual Oral requires students to speak with elements of style that enhance the oral, which in practice means speaking on their subject matter with passion and interest. Similarly, top band responses in the Knowledge and Understanding criterion require a persuasive interpretation of the works, which can be challenging to achieve when all students are speaking on the same texts. Co-designing the course enabled more opportunities for authentic engagement and aligned more with the IBO's (2019) drive for agency.

Greater student agency required me to let go of being the sole decision-maker. This meant that I did not always get to teach the texts that I loved, and I experienced some sadness when no students chose to study Poe for the final unit of the year, as I love teaching his short stories. However, I have had the pleasure of teaching his work before and will likely do so again, whereas these students will only experience Year 11 once. More importantly, the assessment conditions of the IB allow students to make choices regarding which texts they write about for their assessment, so it is better for the students to be choosing something they are interested in and appropriately challenged by rather than suffering through a text because I like it.

The co-design process also worked to minimise some of the restrictions in text selection previously noted in this article. Firstly, the calls for genuine diversity in terms of representation of race, gender and sexuality proposed by many scholars (McGraw & van Leent, 2018; McKnight, 2018; Little & Aglinskas, 2022; Worrell, 2022) were heeded and responded to, as our course featured authors from twelve different countries, nine texts featured representations of LGBTQIA+ identities, three were by Indigenous authors or artists and two featured representations of neurodivergent characters. Additionally, only one new text needed to be purchased, which was within the budget. All the course requirements of the IB Language and Literature course were met, and differentiation was enhanced by the different levels of challenge presented by each text. Students could select from a range of text types, including graphic novels, artworks, novellas, plays, novels and non-fiction essays. When compared to the courses I have taught with previous classes, there were some similarities in that we were still bound by the same resourcing restrictions, but this course featured more variety, particularly in terms of the non-literary choices. This is because the students contributed many non-literary texts to the course list, and I was delighted by their ability to act as collaborators whose contributions shaped our pedagogies (McKnight, 2018).

An unintended, but entirely welcome outcome of my co-design experiment is the way that it has spread throughout our English faculty. Prior to this experiment teachers designed their own courses based on the IB's requirements, but since I started this project in 2023 my colleagues have introduced co-design in their courses, with similarly positive results. While we are still working within the constraints of the budget, we have been able to introduce new texts based on student voice, including *No longer human* by Osamu Dazai, *Fun home* by Alison Bechdel, *Grief is the thing with feathers* by Max Porter, the artwork of Roxana Halls, and films such as *Parasite* (2019), *Ladybird* (2017) and *Barbie* (2023). With each class studying its own unique course, students seem to have a sense of pride in their class and ownership over their materials, and there is such a lovely buzz in the staff room when teachers discuss their courses. I am excited to see how this process continues to evolve.

Challenges and considerations for educators

There are a few important considerations for teachers wishing to implement a co-design model. There is potential for co-design to add to teachers' planning load if students wish to study a range of texts unfamiliar to the teacher. Such concerns are well founded, as compliance measures and resourcing are two material concerns that may dominate teachers' limited planning time (Cheung & O'Sullivan, 2021) There may also be a lack of resources enabling classes to deviate from the previous year's course (Hsu et al., 2023), and worries about the instructional time needed to plan a course, or trepidation about what the students will actually come up with (Lundy, 2007). Co-design requires careful negotiation of teacher identities, a willingness to let go of the need to know everything about a text and a commitment to focusing more on skills than on finite

knowledge. As I experienced, there is also an emotional element to letting go of being the one deciding what to teach, which is a challenging inversion of the usual order and requires careful reflection.

Trying to include all voices meant some texts were only afforded a brief snippet of time, and student feedback was also that we often tried to do too much and they wanted to spend more time on texts before moving on, which I can certainly agree with. The multiple-choice units added an extra dimension to the year, with some having five texts on offer and others being more homogenous. Students seemed to make their choices based on what they enjoyed, but there were times when social elements guided decision-making. Fewer options in multiple-choice units would minimise the potential for students to feel left out if no one wanted to study their texts.

In my context, the IB's inquiry approach helped to minimise this, as I taught the texts that I knew well at the start of the course in order to teach the skills of analysis, then moved to more inquiry-based investigations as the course progressed. For each text, I would use similar pedagogical approaches, such as graphic organisers from Harvard's Project Zero, ask students to research the cultural context of the texts in groups or do a close analysis of the language as a live modelling exercise. I was also able to use resources from previous years and share resources with my colleagues, which lessened the planning load. Multiple-choice units in particular have the potential to add to both the planning and cognitive loads of teachers, particularly if the choices on offer to students are all new to the teacher. I would therefore suggest ensuring that multiple-choice units are carefully planned so that they occur at a time in the year when teachers have sufficient time to devote planning, that teachers keep the balance of new texts and texts they have taught before reasonable, and that teachers work collaboratively to share resources. Student voice does not mean that students get everything they want, but that they are involved in the decision-making, which might mean deciding between two texts that the teacher knows intimately and is well resourced.

There are also social elements that need to be handled carefully. When initially designing the course, students need to be made aware that they may not get to study everything that they want but that their voices will be contributing to the collective. Teachers also need to make sure that the louder voices do not dominate, and that everyone has a voice, particularly

in the initial group-work phase. The process of forming the text list needs to be carefully managed. Inclusion of all student voices means providing opportunities for all students' voices to be heard and acted on. Ellsworth (1989) reminds us that including voice does not guarantee that students will actually be empowered, as the same power structures teachers are trying to subvert may just be amplified if those already comfortable with speaking up are the only ones who do. This can be overcome by asking students to submit individual course plans as well as group ones. There are also no guarantees that the diversity problem will be solved, as some students may not gravitate towards diverse voices, and this may end up reifying the homogeneity that such approaches can subvert. Teachers have an important role to play here as co-collaborators.

Finally, not all schools afford teachers agency, and there may be some institutional resistance to contend with (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019), particularly if it means classes will be studying different things. Teachers or heads of department may be concerned about ceding power to students, particularly when they fear that they have too much content to cover (Bovill et al., 2020). Furthermore, traditional power relationships in schools put teachers above students in the hierarchy, which requires subversion if genuine co-design is to occur (Bessant et al., 2016). Such an approach might not be suitable in all contexts. In some cases, students may feel course design is the job of the teacher and may feel more comfortable with the teacher's decisions (Bovill et al., 2020; Sava, 2022).

Applications in different educational contexts

I have outlined how this approach worked in an IB setting. While the IB Language and Literature course allows quite a lot of freedom, I argue that a similar approach could be undertaken in the Queensland Senior Syllabuses for English and Literature. Units 1 and 2 stipulate that students must study at least three texts, with three of the following categories included: play, prose, poetry and multimodal. At least one text must be Australian. This affords many options for teachers to co-design with students, provided that they align with the genres outlined. In Units 3 and 4, students must study at least four texts from the prescribed text list. Although the list is not extensive, it does still offer choice, although as McGraw and van Leent (2018) note, it is very heteronormative. Depending on the resources of the school, teachers could co-design by offering students the choice of

two texts from the list. Multiple-choice units could be incorporated.

For the external examination, schools typically choose one text and all students study the same thing, which may mean that some are not being appropriately challenged while others struggle to keep up. Teachers could instead ask students to choose from the external text list, and co-operative groups could be formed to study the texts together. Gone would be the days of students being forced to invest time in a text they hate, and instead, by working together they could improve other skills, including the skills of teamwork and collaboration.

Conclusion and implications

What started as an individual experiment has grown into a standard way of approaching course design for my whole English faculty. While not without its challenges, promoting student voice, choice and agency through co-design offers many rewards. In a world where teachers' professionalism is persistently questioned in the public arena, it may feel wrong to move teachers away from the decision-making coalface – but rather than eliminating the decision-making role of the teacher, co-design merely reframes the role from leader to co-collaborator. The teacher's role in ensuring co-design runs smoothly is vital, and ranges from ensuring all course requirements are met to being cognisant of the social conditions needed to create democratic educational spaces and ensuring that the final course list is a negotiated document representative of both what the class wants and what the teacher can provide without overburdening their (already large) workload.

The data-driven dynamic of positivist policy which undermines teacher knowledges and favours evidence-informed practices without critique (Wescott, 2021) stands in stark contrast to the experimental and imaginative model I have proposed in this article. However, I would argue that systems that favour uniformity and homogeneity will struggle to produce students with the skills needed to compete in the diverse future. Co-designing curriculums provides opportunities for active citizenship; it can increase motivation and engagement, and assists in incorporating diverse texts and texts that students enjoy. I urge teachers to consider the possibilities for an English curriculum that not only includes but foregrounds student knowledges. Doing so makes education something done *with* and not done *to*.

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Ennui of English Teachers post-COVID Amid an Emerging Teacher Shortage

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Abstract: Two teachers, one practising, one having recently left the classroom, explored the post-COVID slump among teachers in Australia through a metalogue. Topics include: professional learning; Initial Teacher Education; teacher attrition and retention; and teachers' activity online via social media. The overwhelming sense is one of fatigue, ennui and exhaustion that goes beyond mere stress and heavy workloads. It is proposed that these negative effects will have significant impacts upon the teacher workforce in the coming years. This paper provides insights from within teaching that are currently lacking within the research literature, where limited scholarship covers this post-COVID landscape.

Key words: Teachers; Burnout; Post-COVID; Metalogue; Teacher retention; Teacher attrition; Professional learning; Social media.

Introduction

Following on from our smaller contributions to a piece on the COVID teaching experience as Victorian English teachers (Enticott et al., 2022; Owen at al., 2022) in the location with the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world (Cheong et al., 2021; Mannell & Meese, 2022) and previous collaborative writing (Kolber & Enticott, 2020), we seek to report on the state of teacher fatigue following the long aftermath of the COVID experience. As English teachers in the Australian context, let alone within the research literature, our views are rarely heard, so we felt a need to reflect the broad sense of ennui and listlessness we and our colleagues are experiencing to the wider academic community. This information is time-sensitive, and thus it is of great importance for teachers, policy-makers and the wider community to be aware of it.

For those unfamiliar with them, the three stages of remote learning within (Metropolitan) Victoria during the COVID lockdowns are outlined below, adapted from Owen at al. (2022) and Wright (2021):

> Remote Learning 1.0 (April 15–June 9, 2020)
> Remote Learning 2.0 (July 20–August 1, 2020)
> Remote learning 3.0 (August 2–October 26, 2020).

In total, teachers and students experienced 174 days of remote learning, and this experience, plus the restrictive nature of this method of teaching, changed teachers' outlook and approach. Of course the broader nature of the lockdowns and COVID more generally are important, but here we focus solely on the changes to our professional work and our professional identities as teachers, and English teachers specifically.

Positionality

The foregrounding of our identities seems highly relevant both for the methodology being adopted here and the need to foreground personal identity within broader academic discourse (Hradsky, 2022; Moodie & Fricker, 2023).

Steven Kolber was an English teacher within the Victorian government system for 12 years, and has recently transitioned to a research role within the Faculty of Education at the University of Melbourne. He taught through the COVID-19 pandemic and shared his experience in academic (Enticott et al., 2022; Owen at al., 2022) and non-academic (Kolber, 2020a; 2020b; 2021; Prytz, 2021) contexts. At the height of the pandemic, he was named as a Top 50 finalist in the Varkey Foundation's 'Global Teacher Prize'. In addition, he worked with undergraduate and Masters level pre-service teachers between 2020 and 2021.

Emma Enticott is an English teacher in the Victorian government system, entering her fourth year as an educator. She started her career during the COVID-19 pandemic, seeking connection and understanding through writing and reflecting with her English teaching colleagues (Enticott et al., 2022; Owen at al., 2022). In 2022, she was named a 'Rising Star' in Education by *The Educator*. She implements the traits of being a lifelong learner in her pedagogy and enjoys expanding her knowledge on a broad spectrum of educational literature. Crucially, her teaching experience included one year of 'traditional' teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic, providing her with experiences on both sides of these pedagogies and life-shaping events.

Methodology

A metalogue is a conversational dialogue that takes the form of the topic being discussed as a means to include the voices of those often overlooked (Bateson, 1972). Metalogue has previously been used in this journal to explore a pedagogy and to explicate curriculum and teaching (Shann & Cunneen, 2011; Willis & Exley, 2016). We feel that this methodology is a suitable means to explore the state of the teaching profession in a speedy and responsive manner. While other research is exploring, and will continue to explore, teaching and the English teacher workforce, it typically takes the form of large-scale, funded interview sequences, and as such tends to feature long timelines and a requirement to aggregate, anonymise and homogenise teacher voices. To model the expediency and pace of communication afforded by the metalogue model, in contrast, we completed our dialogue via Twitter direct messages (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014) and Facebook Messenger, these tools being common methods of teacher communication for those not sharing a school context. The conversational nature and structure of the piece is one experienced by teachers the world over, whether it is held in person – within a classroom, for example – or online via one of these platforms. Taking place during the first quarter of 2023, including holidays, weekends and post-parenting windows of time, it both illustrates and represents the nature of teachers' work.

As with most things related to teacher work, the bulk of this paper was produced during the holiday period, late into the evenings and on weekends – which indeed is one of the issues with teaching in the post-COVID era, as will be explored here. Metalogue has been proposed as a way of shifting the focus of academic writing to under-researched groups and topics (Hogarth & Czuy, 2021), as it allows the possibility of providing voices for those not often heard from – in this case, the often silenced and ignored voices of Australian teachers, and specifically English teachers. A similar format has been used in popular non-fiction, such as in Winfrey and Perry's book *What happened to you?* (2021), which informed our stylistic approach here. Rather than approaching a single topic, however, we seek to provide a snapshot of topics directly affecting English teachers within Victoria; to do so, we have outlined our guiding research questions. These research questions were generated post hoc as we looked back over our previous message exchanges and noted that these were their primary and recurring topics. Through reflection and further development, we then created this metalogue, attempting to capture the density of our exchanges while maintaining the casual and conversational register shared among teaching colleagues.

As a result, the idea of a 'carefully unfolding pedagogy of metalogue' (Exley et al., 2019) involving 'a conversation about some problematic subject' (Bateson, 1972, p. 12) – in this case multiple subjects – proved compelling for us both as teachers. We have also sought to replicate the nature of teachers' online communication, in which research and news articles are shared back and forth and in-depth discussions on the issues facing the profession are shared. To indicate specific sections that draw from the research literature directly, some sections have been indented, though the writing remains that of the authors.

Metalogue

STEVEN:

As you recover from this Term 1 and begin your school holiday break, how has your teaching been going?

EMMA:

I've been really engaged with my teaching at the moment, we're working our way through some new texts and a new VCE English Study Design (VCAA, 2023). I'm getting to be really creative in the classroom at the moment and I'm loving it.

STEVEN:

Do you feel the new study design (VCAA, 2023) is providing opportunities for students to connect with the real world?

EMMA:

There is a new 'Crafting Texts' element (VCAA, 2023), where students write about an overarching framework. There is an onus on going beyond the text and exploring the context, audience, and purpose of each, which essentially forces further reading and study.

STEVEN:

Have you been doing a lot of professional learning to establish a clear understanding of this new study design, and how to make it work within your school?

EMMA:

Yes and no. As it's only being implemented for Units 1 and 2 this year (VCAA, 2023), VCAA has been the main source of professional learning. As we implement Units 3 and 4 I'm hoping for more.

STEVEN:

From my perspective, being involved with delivering professional learning offerings for a range of organisations – we've noticed a real drop-off in teacher participation. As you and I first met at a TeachMeet (Estermann, 2011; Kolber, 2020a; Kolber & Heggart, 2022), I've also noticed these are not happening often either. Online professional learning has also lost much of its excitement for many. While the buzz in social media collaboration caused by COVID-19 emergency teaching has similarly fallen off. This worries me; if a new emergency situation were to emerge these collaborative networks would again be important, and they may not be around when and if they become necessary again.

I think this is especially unfortunate because these additional forums for professional learning and collaboration are where further, often cutting-edge, learning, can be shared.

Not having these collaborative forums available for teacher sharing and interaction represents a significant loss of cultural and intellectual capital for teachers!

Have you noticed any of these three things being different: Online professional learning, face-to-face and social media collaboration?

EMMA:

I do believe that, anecdotally, each of the three mentioned above has decreased. I feel as if teachers banded together during COVID-19, but that sense of camaraderie has lessened as the year goes along.

STEVEN:

I am witnessing a real sense of ennui and fatigue, heading towards burnout for many of my English teacher colleagues. As you say, less camaraderie is a really bad sign! Let's explore what may have caused this.

What are things like where you are?

EMMA:

I logged into the Victorian government recruitment system this morning and noticed that there are close to 700 teaching jobs still available at the time of writing this, the end of Term One in 2023.

In March 2023, Precel (2023) was reporting on Victorian schools 'being short 1000 teachers'. The article further states that schools are splitting classes, running skeleton programs.

I also personally hear of a lot of this going on around me. With staff under even more increasing workloads, plus post-pandemic effects, the pressures of being a teacher are, perhaps, the highest they have ever been.

STEVEN:

Absolutely! And, this comes at a time where the interest in and concern for teachers is at an all-time low.

I'm seeing mental health concerns among many of my colleagues, and it seems burnout is a common feature of those still teaching.

While the resilience approaches of teachers during the pandemic (Lemon & McDonough,

2023) have been considered, it feels research and public interest in teachers have moved on. While 2022 research suggests that 10.8% of teachers intend to remain in teaching for a single year; 19.9% for five years; 8.7% for ten years; with 27.6% intending to remain in teaching until retirement. With the remaining percentage, 33%, noting 'other' or 'unsure'. The rumblings of a 'teacher shortage' are beginning to emerge (Mitchell, et al., 2022).

But I believe that the effects are already being felt sharply. Among my colleagues, we always marvelled at just how few applicants we had applying for positions advertised at inner-city schools, noting that if it was hard for us to fill positions, then it must be difficult for rural, regional and remote schools also. These vacancies not only impact upon students directly, but also upon other teachers who are called upon to pick up the slack by teachers out ill, creating a vicious cycle where illness begets illness.

EMMA:

I am seeing this at many suburban schools this year – the same jobs being put up repeatedly. The problem is only exacerbated in rural schools, where I have also taught. With no employed teachers in these classrooms, the other teachers of similar subjects are given the extra planning, marking and assessing of student work. As English teachers, we feel the load of marking highly anyway.

Hobbs's (2013) research into teacher shortages proves that teachers are then expected to teach 'out of area', leading to the increase of workload aforementioned and having to spend time learning the new content itself. The Teacher Financial Incentive was created by the Victorian government in order to give cash allowances to staff to move to hard-to-staff schools regionally, but these allowances have also been allocated to suburban schools this year (Department of Education, 2023).

But while this allowance is allocated in good faith, if there are simply not enough teachers to fill the positions, then they cannot be filled.

Enrolments into teacher education qualifications in Victoria from 2017 to 2019 were 25% less from 2017 to 2019 (Carey 2022), which shows that we have 25% less coming teachers into the profession. Furthermore, Heffernan et. al. (2022)

recently found that 59% of teachers want to leave the profession currently. Teachers are struggling with a heavy day-to-day practice such as workload (Heffernan et. al. 2022), which is seemingly affecting the retention of teachers.

STEVEN:

What I have heard from colleagues across the system is that private schools (both Catholic and independent) are outbidding and offering incentives for new teachers to join their schools.

These include $160,000 starting positions (Marchant, 2023), as opposed to the government first increment of $75,726, a difference of over $84,000. It is clear that these incentives are outstripping those provided by the government to move outwards to remote and rural schools, which range between $9,000 and $50,000 (Department of Education, 2023).

The public schools cannot match these offers, which can only make things worse for equity. The inequity within our system is best understood at the level of students (Bonner et al., 2021; Sahlberg, 2021), but the divisions among teachers created by these incentives are little understood. The ramifications of these forces we will see in the very near future.

It doesn't take much imagination to realise what will happen when we don't have enough teachers entering the profession, and teachers leaving at an alarming rate.

In research, they talk about teacher supply as a 'lagging indicator', which means that there are few actions that can occur quickly enough to respond expediently. And maybe we are the canaries in the coal mine crying out what's happening before it becomes fully clear to others!

EMMA:

What is your theory on what will happen when we do have that insufficient number of teachers? Who bears the brunt, and what are the effects?

STEVEN:

To me, the answer is sadly our students. I've just spent a day at a symposium discussing equitable funding, and the nature of Australia's decline on PISA testing was a recurrent theme. In a system where outcomes are already declining and teachers' perception of their status is low (Heffernan et al., 2022), things are not looking

good for our students' achievement. I think the teacher shortage is more about conditions within the profession than it is about anything else. I know of many exceptional teachers who are working as consultants, are retraining or have joined large EdTech companies instead. I believe there might be enough teachers around, including those like myself who are still within education but not in a classroom, and retired teachers. But how would a system known for having among the longest 'in class' hours among OECD nations (OECD, 2014), where teacher workload is a recurrent concern, be able to tempt teachers back to those conditions once they have tasted the staider and calmer lifestyle outside of teaching? For the first time in my career I am hearing reports of teachers just up and quitting, as in, 'I'm not coming in tomorrow', which was previously completely unheard of.

Have you seen much of this kind of attrition? Teachers leaving to pursue education-adjacent careers?

EMMA:

I'm in an interesting position here, as I am a teacher within the first five years of my career. Weldon (2018) states that on estimate, early career teachers leave at rates of 30–50% before their first five years are complete.

I have seen from my own graduating cohort teachers who are already jaded before they even enter a classroom. I can attest to this. Despite loving my job, *I'm on holidays right now and am writing rubrics in my 'break' time.* It's increasingly hard to take breaks as a teacher.

Skills learned in education courses are very transferable to other industries, such as organisation, planning, working to tight deadlines. Teachers are taking these highly regarded skills into careers where they are valued, economically and professionally.

One of the best articles I read last year was by Mockler (2022), where she examines why 'no one wants to be a teacher' in Australia. The article touches on the negative media portrayal of teachers, which other industries don't succumb to as much as our profession does. When you are feeling down about your job and then you have 'disproportionately negative' media about you, and politicians calling you a 'dud' (Mockler, 2022) as Stuart Robert did, you might seek employment where you are not as targeted.

STEVEN:

The news media are so important for teachers' self-perception; we often feel we are metaphorically 'bashed', online.

> As Shine (2020) notes, 'a very high proportion (88 per cent) of those surveyed said that they believed the reporting of schools and schooling was predominantly negative', and also that teachers were more engaged with the news than the general population (Shine, 2018, 2021).

The impact of this on teachers still in training is also very high, as the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) field is invariably questioned and found wanting, with an expert panel being recently formed. Being jaded was something I saw with my own Higher Education ITE students across 2020 and 2021 – even more so than experienced teachers. For experienced teachers, online teaching was clearly not what teaching they had 'signed up for', but for teachers in training with no other experiences this kind of teaching was viewed as especially hollow. It also meant that teachers in training were often more confident and comfortable with teaching online than their mentors, which created an interesting tension within this 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975).

As a result, our new teachers entering the profession have had different experiences of teaching that do not necessarily transfer neatly into face-to-face teaching, and I expect the famous 'first five years' 40–50% of attrition that you mention will likely increase.

I think there are higher rates of teachers leaving the profession among those who survived the COVID teaching experience. And that this is in large part about the exposure to flexible work arrangements that evaporated as soon as the 2020 and 2021 COVID lockdowns did. The way we could choose which classes were teacher-centric, build in breaks, work from home, have online meetings, and have chances for personal wellness and physical exercise were all a massive positive change. Going back into full-time face-to-face teaching with all of its tight restrictions, timetables enforced by bells and exceptionally high expectations was quite a shock for many of my colleagues and myself!

How did you find this transition at your school?

EMMA:

I couldn't agree more. While I found remote learning jarring at first, I now look back at it with fondness. I found that I was able to still be myself as well as having my teaching persona. Now if I get home too late after a meeting, it is too dark outside for me to enjoy my own interests, like going for a walk, whereas during remote learning, I could be on a meeting call and be walking at the same time. I was much more productive and felt more inspired during remote learning, as I now cannot find enough hours in the day to collaborate, meaning I need to do it out of hours.

While I feel our conversation has touched on many reasons, we have both felt and seen that teachers are tired and finding alternate career paths. What are steps that can be taken to support teachers?

The role of the teacher is complex (Dunning, 2022; Kolber & Heggart, 2022), and I don't think that the removal of any of our work is the solution. Victorian teachers in their new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement have been granted a reduction of face-to-face teaching hours from 20 to 18.5 per week (DET, 2022), but are still overwhelmed.

Is the solution to simply just trust teachers and make their work and required tasks more flexible to complete?

STEVEN:

Nothing here is simple. As a teacher and researcher, I focus on how the people themselves might change things – how teachers might become empowered to raise their voices about their work? How can we work around and within policy constraints to develop leadership skills, pedagogical gifts (Kolber, 2022), research literacy and a means to contribute to policy level discussion, just as we've done here, exploring the realities of our situation within schools and ways that we might move to leverage positive changes for our broader society? But policy logics and architectures are the cogs that pinch the work of teachers, and in so doing lead to challenging experiences for students.

Are you feeling optimistic or pessimistic about your own future in teaching? And the profession more broadly?

EMMA:

I do genuinely feel optimistic. I strongly believe that teaching is a vocation, and that those of us who do it genuinely have a desire to help. However, when you have a large cohort of selfless individuals, advocating for change becomes a lesser priority. Like you've said yourself, Steven, empowerment might be the key.

Discussion

This metalogue drew upon the following research questions, all centring around the idea of COVID, remote teaching and learning, and how they changed teachers. We asked: How has COVID-19 changed teachers':

Professional learning

Among teachers, professional learning (PL) participation, especially voluntary and free online offerings, is being less actively engaged with. The official PL provided by departmental bodies and similar remains popular, but the real discretionary and potentially nourishing learning that takes place elsewhere is both less prevalent, and less attended when it does occur.

Likelihood of changing careers / persisting in teaching

The likelihood of teachers changing careers has increased, and the likelihood of them persisting in teaching has reduced. During the period of remote teaching, working flexibly, especially for those with children and childcare commitments, seemed possible, if only momentarily. When this possibility was removed, other careers within education seemed more likely, and more compelling as a result.

Attrition and recruitment – amid a teacher shortage

Teacher attrition continues to increase, and recruitment has become incredibly difficult, with many positions unable to be filled. This is true for inner-city metropolitan schools, typically assumed to be 'easy-to-staff', and as reported here, it is also definitely true for schools beyond the 'inner-city' mould also.

Media representation

As explored here, teachers see themselves 'bashed' within the media, a forum that they are acutely aware of. Just as with changing working conditions, there was a brief pause in this negative coverage, when teachers were briefly appreciated. This shift only further emphasised the return to negative, deficit-focused coverage.

Changed structure and format of teaching in secondary schools

As outlined here, the structures of secondary schools have remained rigidly unchanging despite the comparative freedom of the remote teaching period. However, as a result of the changes caused by the ennui and listlessness of teachers, the nature of teaching within schools has become a lot more reliant on casual relief teachers (CRTs) to fill gaps. When CRTs are not available, the result is a further compounding of workloads upon those who are at school teaching, rather than being off sick.

Changing policies

Although they have only been discussed in the abstract, the policies most pertinent to this discussion were those around pay and recruitment. The Teacher Financial Incentive was mentioned as a specific example of a short-term, focused policy rather than long-term thinking that might actually change the way teaching is viewed within the community. This is the challenge of policy in this area: when the goal is societal change – improving the perception of teachers and teaching – small measures are unlikely to move the needle.

Preparation and ITE

Those training and going on placements during the lockdown and remote learning periods were asked to teach in a way not properly conceived of. Indeed, they were asked to observe mentors teaching in ways they themselves had never been prepared for. With the snap back to traditional teaching, the utility of their placement experiences must be questioned. As a result, the likelihood of teachers being unable to experience the invigorating work of teaching a class full of students may well mean that they did not persist in their studies.

Day-to-day practices for teachers

Conceptualised as a teacher shortage, the lack of teaching staff has negative effects upon those who remain, and especially those who work within the hardest-to-staff schools where there are collapsed or combined classes and a sharp increase in teachers teaching out-of-area. It also means a greater reliance upon CRTs, who are increasingly becoming a limited and overstretched resource.

Online activity and social media use

Teacher activity on social media has also decreased exponentially, posing potential risks in future emergencies. This can be witnessed in informal discussion, but also in the number of Twitter (Now 'X') chats, online TeachMeets and other events that can be seen as signs of the health of teachers' learning communities. The continuing impacts of Twitter's/X's platform instability has a similar effect, playing into the lack of activity and engagement among teachers.

Conclusion

Upon the conclusion of this conversation, both authors felt exhausted and drained. We hope that the metalogue conversation provided here, mimicking as it does staffroom and online exchanges between teachers, provides timely and time-sensitive insights into English teachers' experiences in Victoria, Australia following extensive lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The format and style of this metalogue reinforces the ways in which practising teachers leverage and use research within their discussions and their work. It shows that teacher media representation is of great importance in keeping teachers engaged and excited to continue their work. It shows that teachers, both practising and outside of teaching, hold 'teaching' as a collective and shared endeavour. Like Diamond and Bulfin (2023), we share a 'care of the profession' (p. 3), and we wholeheartedly want people to be aware of just how at risk teachers are. It is our commitment to and care for the profession that informs this piece of writing. Finally, it is important because as outlined above, many conversations of this type occur via Direct Message across messenger servers, and are therefore never made public. While this metalogue itself may well be mediocre, it is representative of thousands of other conversations just like it that may never be seen. Teachers' lack of representation within media coverage further compounds this fact.

The facts outlined in it seem unlikely to change because the structures of our schooling system and the format of teaching in secondary schools have not changed, despite the massive alterations and variations wrought by remote emergency teaching as a result of COVID. The changing policies of government institutions show some awareness of these emerging problems, but the proactive investment of private schools mean that divisions within the teaching profession across public and private school lines are

being reinforced. The constant focus on ITE and fault-finding in the professionals it produces is contrasted against the sheer difficulty of training professionals to face the inequitable and diverse range of school systems that they may be required to teach in. Teachers' day-to-day practices changed dramatically during lockdown teaching and COVID, but the rigidity of timetables and high levels of teaching hours returned swiftly with the return to face-to-face.

Implications for English teachers:

This piece's focus on two English teachers is important, as within the education discourse there has been a move towards the 'Science of Reading' and 'Literacy', in which 'a standardised and instrumental understanding of literacy teaching has come to the fore' (Diamond & Bulfin, 2023, p. 2). As Diamond and Bulfin (2023) point out, 'progressive understandings of English and literacy education have been subject to "discourses of derision" in politico-media commentary and policy, subjecting English to scrutiny and top-down control' (p. 2). As English teachers, we require considerable freedom of pedagogy, and an exploration of diverse and indeed challenging content is a requirement, but a reductive approach to literacy and literacy instruction has narrowed and limited the scope and possibilities of teachers available to subject English. This narrowing runs alongside the issues outlined in this paper and contributes to the listlessness of teachers, and may well decrease interest in becoming an English teacher in society.

As a result, the training of English teachers-to-be must consider the fraught nature of both teaching broadly and teaching English specifically, and the low levels of confidence and joy among members of the teaching profession. This is likely to affect mentors, text selection, teacher pay and job recruitment processes, among many other things. Teaching English in challenging times may well mean that the quality of delivery is brought into question. While English teachers are often considered to be the most common teacher candidates, we may well see an increase in the number of out-of-area English teachers. This is both a startling future and one we must begin to prepare ourselves for, as we seek to build an empowered profession and a cadre of capable and joyful English teachers.

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Annotation for Critical Reading:
An Action Research Project

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Abstract: Using an action research methodology, this project investigates the benefits of explicitly teaching secondary students annotation as a critical reading skill in a Queensland school. It focuses on teaching annotation using cues directly related to the curriculum Achievement Standards, which underpin curriculum content and the marking of assessment tasks. Drawing on data from teacher-researcher records of practice, student interviews and work samples, and summative assessment results, our findings suggest that the explicit teaching of annotation yields both improved student growth in assessment results and increased student confidence in their critical reading ability. Overall, they suggest that teaching secondary students critical reading skills such as annotation has benefits, and opens avenues for further research.

Keywords: reading practices, curriculum and pedagogy, reading instruction, critical literacy, assessment

Introduction

Action Research

This action research project was undertaken by a secondary English teacher in a regional Catholic school, in partnership with an academic from the University of Southern Queensland's School of Education with a background in English Literature. To highlight the way in which action research positions the teacher as researcher in its conceptualisation, the English teacher's role is described as 'teacher-researcher' throughout, while the academic is referred to as the 'academic partner' to highlight the collaborative nature of the project and the way in which school-based action research, which is often completed informally, can be undertaken with academic rigour via a partnership approach. The project was sparked by the teacher-researcher's initial reflections on the perceived benefits of introducing annotation in a Year 11 class. An opportunity for a collaborative research project offered a way for the teacher-researcher's use of annotation to be validated through empirical qualitative research.

As Clark et al. (2022) argue, one of the impetuses for action research is 'unrealized self-understandings to be discerned by [educators] analysing their own practices and understandings' (p. 28). In this study, the teacher-researcher had introduced annotation as a critical reading practice in her Year 11 Literature class the previous year and anecdotally observed its efficacy. This prompted the development of a more systematic investigation of annotation in critical reading, in partnership with an academic partner and using an action research methodology. As Clark et al. (2022) argue, 'Action research offers one path to more deliberate, substantial, and critical reflection that can be documented and analyzed to improve an educator's practice' (p. 8).

This project adopted the broad action research phases of Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2004; O'Leary, 2004). In brief, the team planned a term-long intervention which included pre-testing student reading strategies, teaching annotation using a supporting Annotation Bookmark (see Figure 1), and post-intervention interviews with

Figure 1

Annotation Bookmark

students. This plan was enacted, with the teacher-researcher developing a narrative record of practice over time. Observations were gathered from summative assessment data, annotation samples and post-testing following a second term of teaching with annotation. This paper serves as one of the project's reflective activities. The project was also co-designed with an academic research partner, and this partnership contributed to a more rigorous study, allowing for the dual coding of interview data and the reduction of relational impacts upon interview responses, as interviews were conducted by the academic partner rather than the teacher-researcher.

The goal of this action research project was to investigate the question: *To what extent can the teaching of annotation with explicit links to the Australian Curriculum English Achievement Standards improve students' critical reading ability and assessment responses?* The sub-questions included: *How do students annotate when reading? How effective do they perceive annotation to be in improving their reading of texts?* and *What impact does the teaching of annotation have on assessment performance and success against the Achievement Standards?*

While action research as a method is sometimes subject to criticism, this project deliberately set out to mitigate some of its most common critiques. As Clark et al. (2022) outline, action research is sometimes perceived as lacking rigour or objectivity. We explicitly acknowledge the personal motivations of the teacher-researcher and explore these fully through narrative inquiry as a method for investigating the underlying beliefs and ideas that may underpin their planning and actions. The involvement of an academic partner who led the data analysis and collection of evidence from

participants at key points in the project also allowed for data to be triangulated as a part of the analysis. Another common complaint is that the findings of action research are context-specific and cannot be readily generalised to other contexts (Clark et al., 2022). This study thus investigates an approach to reading that requires no special training or resources, has a basis in existing research (Douglas et al., 2016; Fisher & Frey, 2014a; Nerlino, 2023) and can be readily tailored to the context in which it is being used, and so, as a sharing of professional practice, could be adopted and adapted in any secondary school literature or text study.

Annotation

The effectiveness of annotation as an academic reading practice is borne out in research (Allen, 2012). It is characterised by an active engagement with the text, including but not limited to the use of highlighters, sticky notes, underlining, paraphrasing, summaries, arguments and other marginalia (Allen, 2012). This is reiterated by Fisher and Frey (2014b), who emphasise that highlighting alone does not constitute annotation; 'questions, comments, and notes' to support later discussion and writing are a key feature of annotation as part of a close reading strategy (p. 48). Allen (2012) argues that that this sort of reading is motivated by a 'thinker identity' (p. 13) that places the reader in dialogue with the text as an active meaning-maker or -finder, rather than a passive receiver. This understanding of active academic reading underpins Nerlino's (2023) recent action research project, which included a requirement to make 'notes per page' annotations. Akin to both Douglas et al.'s (2016) reading resilience research and this project, Nerlino's (2023) objective was 'to focus on promoting students to persist with doing and following through with the reading in a way that enhanced their comprehension' (p. 3). Nerlino (2023) found that over 83% of respondents read the book more carefully and felt they developed a deeper understanding); however, the focus was on making notes within a certain number of pages, rather than on the content of the notes or the text per se. Fisher and Frey's (2014a) close reading intervention for struggling readers also uses annotation as a key strategy, with the notes focusing on main ideas and language features.

Although annotation as a reading practice is widespread and well established, it is less commonly taught in Queensland schools due to the prevalence of textbook hire schemes (Department of Education, 2023), which mean that texts need to be returned unmarked and in good condition at the end of each school year for use by the next cohort. This action research project stemmed from a teacher-researcher's interest in annotation for critical reading and the subsequent purchase of texts for students to own and annotate.

The academic partner has implemented the 'reading resilience' (Douglas et al., 2016) approach in pedagogy, which sees students respond to multiple-choice quizzes that require re-reading to answer and provide comprehensive explanatory feedback. However, the reading resilience approach focuses on an assessment of student close reading skills in a tertiary setting, whereas the teaching of annotation can be seen as a forerunner to student success in close reading, as it provides the reading scaffold necessary for students to undertake close reading in the first instance.

As Douglas et al. (2016) explain, the reading resilience approach is less reliant on teacher modelling and more about developing a student-centred approach to develop 'sustainable, transferable reading skills' (p. 256). Fisher and Frey (2014b) note that in close reading, students are more responsible and 'held more accountable' (p. 33). It is this focus on increasing student autonomy as critical readers that was the impetus for the annotation project, as in order to undertake the sophisticated close reading required in upper secondary classes, students first need to be able to identify relevant elements of a text to inform their analysis. Annotation challenges the assumption that deconstruction is 'textual vandalism' (Johnson, 1985, p. 140) and drives students to '[pay] attention to what a text is doing – *how* it means not just *what* it means' (p. 141). It also places a renewed focus on the teaching of reading as a skill, which is often seen as automatic or assumed, and overlooked in favour of teaching writing or composition (Poletti et al., 2016, p. 236).

Australian Curriculum

Another key driver for the project was the need to improve student summative assessment performance. In the Australian context, schools are expected to deliver the *Australian Curriculum P–10*, following their state or territory guidelines for its implementation. Students are assessed against the Australian Curriculum Achievement Standards, which describe what students should know and be able to do by the end of the academic year. In Queensland, the Queensland Curriculum and

Table 1

Scaffolded learning experiences to develop annotation skills

Learning experiences	Pedagogical strategy to develop annotation skills
Pre-test	To determine if students already have some annotation skills
Introduction to novels	History, types of novels and book-length literature
Introduction to Australian Curriculum Achievement Standards for Year 9 English	Co-constructed Learning Intentions and Success Criteria for the unit Focus on 'if we are being assessed against these standards, what do we need to be able to do?'
Link co-construction of learning needs to Achievement Standards	Creation of bookmark
Discussion of how annotation can lead to success	Why annotate? How to annotate When to annotate
Demonstration and examples of different annotation styles	Students experiment with them and find one that is comfortable for them Methodology not prescribed
Demonstration of annotation and Gradual Release of Responsibility with Chapter 1 of text	I do We do You do
Independent explorations and annotation of text at student pace	Students annotating based on bookmark
Teacher-led 'deep dives' into specific focus areas of text	Students annotating based on bookmark and teacher focus areas

Assessment Authority (QCAA) provides 'Standards Elaborations' for each learning area and each year level. These are criterion-based rubrics which allow teachers to make judgements about the extent to which students have met or exceeded the Achievement Standards, and are used to determine summative assessment results. To support student success in summative assessment, the teacher-researcher embedded the language of the standards when teaching annotation, asking students to identify elements of the text using terminology from the curriculum. The teacher-researcher also designed a bookmark intended to help students focus on key concepts from the curriculum (Figure 1) and taught annotation strategies explicitly with the goal of improving student autonomy and outcomes, seeking to explore the effectiveness of this through an action research methodology with an academic partner.

The Annotation Bookmark content is provided in Figure 1, with additional detail provided to show alignment to the Australian Curriculum standards, although this information was not made available to students.

Research Design: Methodology and Methods
As outlined above, this project adopts the broad action research phases of Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2004; O'Leary, 2004). In the Planning phase, the team secured ethics approval both from the University of Southern Queensland (H22REA129) and the Toowoomba Catholic Diocese, which oversees the school in which the project took place. Parental permission was also sought and secured prior to the project's commencement. The teacher-researcher developed a unit plan focused on a novel study of John Marsden's *Tomorrow, when the war began* (1993). This Australian young adult novel has a relatively low Lexile (linguistic complexity) level (850L) for a Year 9 cohort, whose recommended Lexile range is 1205-1520L (see lexile.com). It is both culturally and linguistically familiar to the majority of students, so general narrative comprehension was expected and the focus of the unit could be on critical reading and analysis. The teacher-researcher planned a sequence of learning experiences to scaffold students' ability to annotate effectively, as shown in Table 1, which gives an outline of the key learning experiences implemented and how annotation was used in each of these experiences. As the teacher-researcher's narrative outlines, this planning was organic and based on experience and intuition rather than being a purposeful implementation of theory; however, the alignment with Fisher and Frey's (2013) Gradual Release of Responsibility model is notable, as the teacher provided focused instruction about how and what to annotate, modelled annotation and supported students' initial attempts, and then allowed students to annotate with increasing independence.

The Action phase of the study consisted of the students undertaking a pre-test to assess their current reading approaches, noting that all students had been given prior explicit instruction in a range of reading strategies as part of a school literacy initiative. The teacher-researcher then engaged in explicit instruction on annotation, which included providing the scaffolded Annotation Bookmark (Figure 1) that was closely aligned to the Achievement Standards against which the students would ultimately be assessed. After the teacher modelled annotation, the students began their own process of annotation, with teacher feedback.

During the Observation phase at the end of the unit, students' copies of the novel were collected as work samples, the class completed a post-test, and 11 students were interviewed by the academic partner. In addition, summative assessment results were analysed to provide quantitative data in support of the qualitative findings. The opportunity to undertake a further cycle of Observation emerged in the teacher-researcher's planning for the next unit of work, which saw students continue to use annotation as a strategy in their final term of Year 9. The text studied in this term was Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Lexile 1260), which presented a significant challenge for students in terms of both language complexity and cultural familiarity. A post-assessment survey at the end of the term assessed whether students had found annotation useful when working with a more challenging text, and their summative assessment results were added to the extant data.

The teacher-researcher's narrative captures their reflections both during and after the action research cycle, and this paper serves as an opportunity to analyse and synthesise the evidence collected during the Observation phase, thus serving as the Reflection stage of the project.

Participants

The participants in this project were the teacher-researcher and a multi-gender Year 9 English Extension class in a regional Catholic secondary school. Only one student had a multicultural background, and most were from urban locations and were not socioeconomically disadvantaged. The class included six male, twenty female and two non-binary students. There were 28 students in total in the class, with 11 giving consent to participate in interviews. Whole-class data was also used when analysing assessment results and class reflection activities.

Data Analysis

Each data set was analysed separately, and the findings were then synthesised to assess the overall impact of teaching annotation. The data collected were:

- Achievement Standards pre-test
- reading strategy pre-test
- annotation samples
- reading strategy post-test
- teacher-researcher narrative
- student interview responses
- summative assessment results.

During the Observation phase of the action research cycle, the student pre- and post-tests and the novel annotation samples gathered throughout the project were subject to thematic analysis which identified trends and patterns in the students' annotations; this then informed subsequent iterations of the action research cycle. The summative assessment results were analysed to identify the growth students achieved, using the broader Year 9 cohort's data as a comparative data set.

Pushor and Clandinin (2009) suggest that 'if we understand action research as research that results in action or change in the practices of individual researchers, participants, and institutional practices' (p. 290) narrative inquiry can be relevant, as 'practitioner researchers … tell their stories of how they have taken action to improve their situations by improving their learning' (p. 293). The teacher narrative was thus constructed during the Reflection stage, and analysis of the narrative was used to inform subsequent phases of action.

Finally, student interview responses were analysed thematically using Nvivo. In all instances, thematic analysis was undertaken independently by the two researchers and their results were then correlated, which further increased the rigour and objectivity of the study. The average Kappa value across the codes used in the discussion was 0.394, which is at the upper end of the 'Fair' range of intercoder agreement in both Landis and Koch's (1977) and Altman's (1991) scales (De Vries et al., 2008). This relatively low degree of intercoder agreement indicated different coding behaviours between the coders, rather than differences in the overall content coded, which had an average agreement of 94.56% across the themes discussed.

Limitations

The comparison of the Nvivo coding of interview

responses revealed that one coder tended to multi-code examples and code longer passages, while the other single-coded individual phrases. This suggests that greater intercoder agreement could be achieved by taking a more consistent shared approach to coding behaviour, and engaging in a review of partner work, as suggested in Allsop et al. (2022). However, given the demands on the teacher-researcher's time and the additional supporting data collected, for this project, further revision of the data to increase intercoder agreement was not undertaken.

The relationships between teacher planning and practice, student experience and testing results are explored in the discussion below, framed by the inquiry sub-questions.

Findings

A number of different data sources were used in this study. First, the teacher-researcher developed a narrative about their teaching of annotation, and articulated how the Annotation Bookmark (Figure 1) was developed using the Australian Curriculum Achievement Standards and terminology. This narrative follows.

Teacher-Researcher Narrative

As part of my practice as an English and Literature teacher, text annotation has been important in helping students build reading comprehension skills, as well as in providing them with easily identifiable markers to refer to when looking for evidence in texts. In English and Literature, a large proportion of the texts studied are novels. It happens, though, that in many schools students access the texts through a textbook hire scheme and are therefore unable to annotate the texts.

When I first moved to the College as the Curriculum Leader for English, I proposed that the school should add set novels and play texts to the Book List for each grade so that students could purchase them. Being able to annotate the text was one of the main reasons cited in the proposal. The proposal was approved for the Book Lists of Years 10–12 students. We initiated it the following year in 2020 (which proved a good thing, as COVID forced a partial shutdown of the library and book hire scheme for non-digital texts).

That year, I began informally teaching annotation with a Year 11 Literature class using teacher-led reading and annotation of initial chapters, with a focus on the 'Knowledge Application' Assessment Objectives of the QCAA *Literature General Senior syllabus V1.4*. This

was the first time these students had ever written in a novel, and after initial hesitations, they were excited by the possibilities that annotation presented. Although the unit was not structured or formally researched, anecdotally, the students found using objectives-focused annotation as a reading strategy to be a very successful method of learning. It prompted an interest in me as an educator and I wondered about other ways of approaching annotation.

Alongside this, the College Leadership created a new Strategic Plan with a heavy focus on improved literacy, with Key Performance Indicators attached to NAPLAN literacy results. Fortnightly 'Guided Reading' lessons were timetabled as part of this Strategic Intent and staff were trained to deliver Reading Comprehension lessons to levelled groups of students. In these sessions, students learned reading skills such as Q-A-R (Question Answer Relationship), Box-it, Summarising, Root words, Prefixes and Suffixes, Skimming, Scanning and others. Annotation was not explicitly taught. These lessons were taught parallel to content in their English and Humanities classes, using content-adjacent texts and concepts.

In 2022, an opportunity to partner with a UniSQ researcher presented itself. I saw this as a way to more formally investigate the impact of annotation on both reading comprehension and the application of assessment objectives and Achievement Standards. The College's strategic priorities for Literacy Improvement, and the addition of a 'standalone' class of motivated Year 9 Extension English students to my teaching load, meant that I had a unique opportunity to conduct an action research project.

The program for the Year 9 Extension English class had not yet been written, and the students demonstrated such strong determination and desire to be involved in the co-construction of their English 'journey' that we were able to decide as a class which novel we would study for their Term 3 unit, and I was able to petition College Leadership to purchase novels for that class so the students could own copies of the text to annotate. I was also able to focus the class on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Achievement Standards and the relevant elaborations so the students could better determine their study needs.

The focus on the ACARA Achievement Standards stemmed from an impact cycle run in a Professional Learning Team I had led on improving metacognition and metalanguage use in the classroom. In the current

Queensland Certificate of Education senior system, students have access to, and are actively encouraged to engage with, the syllabus documents, and doing so requires competence in the metalanguage of each subject area. Working with this class and the ACARA Achievement Standards was a way for me to test the teaching and learning of curriculum-based metalanguage in the lower grades. Students already had a good grasp of the metalanguage of Language Features and Text Structures from their first unit of work, so exploring how the Language Features and Text Structures fit within the bigger picture was a logical next step. I also drew from language used in the QCAA Senior General English/Literature Syllabuses to draw connections between the ACARA metalanguage and the QCAA metalanguage. This was done in order to begin developing these connections in a group of students who would be going on to study General English and/or Literature in their senior years.

To assist the students in making connections between the Achievement Standards, Language Features and Text Structures and the novel they were studying, and to guide them in understanding what to annotate, I created a bookmark that synthesised the links between the curriculum metalanguage and their unit of work. This bookmark served as a visual reminder of what to annotate, in line with the Achievement Standards.

The teaching and exploration of the ACARA Achievement Standards metalanguage through novel annotation, although very difficult for the class at first, proved influential in guiding students in measuring their own successes in the unit. We then repeated the process in the following unit, which was a Shakespeare play text study.

Student Work Samples

Pre-Test

The pre-test consisted of two tasks. The first task assessed student understanding of the language and concepts found in the Achievement Standards, and the second assessed the strategies they used when reading text analytically. The Achievement Standards pre-test first asked students to explain their understanding of what they would need to do to demonstrate particular elements of the Achievement Standards, and most students were able to give sound responses to these questions, although their use of cognitive verbs was not always well aligned to the language of the Standards. Next, students were asked to apply their understanding to a passage of text. Interestingly, very few students were able to complete the questions, and almost all were unable to explain how 'texts position an audience' or 'how language choices and conventions are used to influence an audience'. This pre-testing reinforced the teacher-researcher's design of the Annotation Bookmark, which prompted students to identify specific language features, attitudes, values, beliefs and other evidence that could be used to address these aspects of the Achievement Standards.

The second pre-test also included questions that were explicitly about student's reading skills. Students had previously had some general introduction to reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, and approximately two-thirds found this the most useful strategy in the pre-test. The other third identified re-reading the text as the most helpful approach, and a number of students indicated that they read or re-read the whole text rather than just sections. A very small number of students mentioned using highlighting or looking back at very specific parts of the text. Interestingly, a small group of students described a process in which they read the questions before engaging with the text, so that they could read the text with the questions in mind, suggesting a more purposeful and targeted approach to their initial reading.

The final question on the second pre-test was a 5-point Likert-scale query about student confidence in their ability to read for analysis. Only two students felt very confident, and only one had limited confidence, while the majority were somewhat confident in their analytical reading ability.

Responses to both pre-tests showed a wide variation in the reading strategies students used. Some students used different coloured highlighters to mark up key passages and phrases, and also numbered paragraphs, while others made no marks on the text at all. Some students underlined and circled, or put key phrases in parentheses. Very few students actually engaged in annotation – that is, adding their own commentary or notes to the marked-up text. However, the Achievement Standards pre-test showed that a number of students engaged in annotation of a different sort, drawing sketches, shapes or characters unrelated to the text in the margins of their work.

Novel Annotations

After the initial period of teacher modelling, students undertook their own annotations. Their approaches

to annotation varied, with some developing systems of colour-coding with highlighters or sticky notes and others engaging in underlining or other simple forms of markup. The most notable change between the pre-test and the students' annotations of the novel was the significant increase in their use of text commentary and the use of codes from the Annotation Bookmark. This meant that student annotations were inherently aligned with the Achievement Standards on which the bookmark was based, and thus they could readily find evidence to use when responding to specific questions about the text. Overall, while each student found an individual approach that was effective for them, they consistently annotated elements within the text more purposefully and more explicitly, rather than simply producing a series of unlabelled highlighted phrases. The efficacy of teaching annotation in a way aligned to the evidence needed to address the Achievement Standards was further borne out by the students' interview responses and in their summative assessment results.

Post-Test

Data from the survey undertaken at the end of the *Romeo and Juliet* unit found that almost all students felt that their annotation skills had continued to improve. Almost half the class noted the increased difficulty of the vocabulary and language features found in the Shakespearean text, but navigated this with the aid of a modern translation or peer support, suggesting a spontaneous engagement with the 'we do together' phase of Fisher and Frey's (2013) Gradual Release of Responsibility model. Approximately a third of the class found it difficult to select relevant content when annotating; however, the majority of students felt that they understood the text better than they would have without annotation. Almost all students felt annotation contributed to their assessment response by allowing them to select text more purposefully, understand and use a wider range of language features, or make stronger links and connections between text and interpretation. Interestingly, one student stated that they did not find annotation helpful, but also indicated they could not have responded to the assessment task without using their annotations.

Student Interviews

In our analysis of the eleven interview responses a number of common themes emerged. These included the students' definitions and descriptions of the annotation process, their confidence, its effects on reading and writing, transferability and uncritical reading practices.

When asked about their general reading practices, students largely described what could be considered uncritical or recreational reading. This included reading during 'down time', reading in bed (six responses) and no use of academic reading strategies such as note-taking, highlighting or annotation. Students tended to 'just read' (Participant 6). Three students suggested that they would summarise sections of their reading if it was from a text they were studying for school, but this was done after reading rather than during it, and tended to be plot-driven rather than focusing on the stylistic or language choices of the author.

Students did not have a shared definition of annotation. However, common elements emerged, including deconstruction of the text, with a number of students noting that the goal was to 'pick it apart' (Participant 3). Students recognised this was done by identifying 'parts of the text' (Participant 6), 'details' (Participants 5 and 1), 'devices' (Participant 4) and 'themes and features' (Participant 10). Most students linked this identification of specific elements of the text to the development of a 'deeper understanding' (Participant 1) of it, and a number noted that it made going back to the text later easier.

Despite this lack of precision in defining annotation, students had a shared understanding of the processes of annotation. They emphasised that they employed a range of approaches, with some using highlighting (Participants 1, 2, 7 and 8), sticky notes (Participants 1, 2, 3 and 7) or colours. Many students mentioned that they found knowing *what* to annotate initially challenging, but overcame this with peer and teacher support (Participants 2, 10 and 11) and gradually 'found out that that actually got easier this time because [they] figured out how to recognise that stuff' (Participant 7). They did not comment extensively on the role of the teacher, although they did note that having been explicitly taught what to look for and how to annotate text was what enabled them to overcome a general uncertainty about the approach.

Unsurprisingly, many respondents noted the effect annotation had on their reading practices. Participant 1 noted that annotating a text prompted them to ask more questions of it, which resulted in a deeper understanding (a point reiterated by Participants 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9). Participant 2 described this as 'when you annotate it, you actually understand what the, the, the

Table 2
Summary of Year 9 cohort results

	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4	Average of Tasks 2-4	Growth (using Task 1 as baseline)
Regular cohort average	7.93	8.62	7.34	7.02	7.66	-0.265
Extension class average	10.51	11.41	10.60	10.28	10.76	0.251
Difference	**2.58**	**2.78**	**3.25**	**3.26**	**Average min/max**	**0.516**
Regular cohort task minimum	2	1	1	2	1.5	
Extension task minimum	5	7	5	6	5.75	
Regular cohort maximum	13	13	14	11	12.75	
Extension maximum	14	15	15	14	14.5	

author is trying to tell you'. Students attributed this to an improvement in their ability to identify specific elements of the text, as exemplified by Participant 8's comment: 'it's easier for me to pick up like similes, metaphors and all those sort of language features because I've gone through and I've looked for them and its easier for me to see'. This also proved to have a degree of transferability, with almost all students noting that they had been able to transfer their annotation skills to other subject areas, most notably in the Humanities and Science.

Several students also made explicit links to how their writing had been influenced by learning annotation, and these responses were closely tied to comments about increasing confidence. About half of the respondents mentioned feeling unsure about what to annotate or their degree of success in using their annotation in their assessment tasks. However, almost all students reported an increased sense of confidence in both their ability to make meaningful annotations and their ability to use these in developing effective assessment responses. As Participant 10's response below exemplifies, a number of students reported an initial uncertainty; however, their confidence in their ability and the perceived benefits of annotation increased over time: 'I didn't have that great of an attitude to it, towards it at the start. But I feel like as I developed like in the task, I feel like I enjoyed it more as I knew what to look for in my assessment'. This was also reiterated by Participant 11, who reported an increased confidence or perceived ability: 'It's a lot easier to think critically about what I'm reading than it was before'.

Assessment performance

While there is a wide array of factors that impact student assessment performance, analysis of the class's and cohort's assessment results showed a widening gap between the class that was taught annotation and the rest of the Year 9 cohort. Grades at the school are awarded on a 15-point scale, A+ to E-. In the first two assessment items of the year, there was a difference of between 2.58 and 2.78 in the average marks of the regular and extension classes: in terms of grades, the regular cohort averaged C to C+ while the extension class averaged B- to B, and this gap was fairly consistent. This gap can in part be attributed to the pre-existing ability gap between an extension class and a regular cohort, as can the differing range of results; while there were only small differences in the maximum result between the two groups on each task, there were much higher minimum results in the extension group (see Table 2).

The teaching of annotation commenced prior to Task 3 and the strategy was maintained by the class in Task 4. In these two tasks, the gap between the regular cohort and the extension class widened to ∼3.25 marks. Additionally, if Task 1 is taken as a baseline, the regular cohort shows a slight negative growth across the remaining items, while the extension class shows a slight positive growth. Obviously, this difference cannot be attributed to annotation alone, particularly when the final task was the students' first study of a Shakespeare play. However, while the wider range of ability in the regular cohort may account for the decline, as the extension students would have been more able to navigate the increase in lexical and

conceptual difficulty, all students also studied the relatively easy *Tomorrow, when the war began* in Task 3 and the gap in performance was evident for this task also, suggesting it was not only the increased difficulty of the text being studied that contributed to variations between the two groups.

Analysis and Discussion

Given the variety of data sources used in this study, the discussion below has been framed by the overarching research questions. This allowed for data from differing sources to be synthesised into a more coherent whole.

How do students annotate when reading?

The initial pre-test and interview responses indicate that students initially found annotation challenging, as 'interpretive reasoning is not an easy skill to master' (Deane, 2020, p. 1). However, following a period of teacher modelling, most students were able to devise an annotation system that worked for them. Their annotation strategies were further supported by the scaffolding bookmark provided by the teacher, despite this not being a 'natural' reading practice. In other words, this modelling and scaffolding of annotation served as a 'cognitive apprenticeship' (Deane, 2020, p. 1) for the students, allowing them to devise their own annotation styles as they became more familiar with the curriculum terminology they needed to apply in their critical reading.

The wide variety of annotation styles observed in the research findings addresses one of the common concerns of action research: that is, that the approach under investigation is context-specific. The variation in student style demonstrates that annotation as a critical reading strategy can be effective even with personal variation – or rather, that the benefit is derived from the explicit teaching of annotation in a way aligned with the Achievement Standards, which makes student annotations more purposeful and more useful when devising assessment responses. As Fisher and Frey (2014b) point out, annotation is not simply circling and highlighting, but a process of writing 'questions, comments and notes to themselves' (p. 48), so it stands to reason that each student should do this in a way that makes sense to them individually. The commonality in the annotation practice comes from what individuals are looking for in the text, which in this study was framed by the Annotation Bookmark.

The pre- and post-tests also reveal that while only some of the initial responses showed (limited) evidence of annotation, in the form of underlining and occasional highlighting, the post-test results suggest that students not only adopted annotation during the unit but were able to make more purposeful annotations than they had previously, which aligns with Nerlino's (2023) findings that students were more engaged in the learning after being taught annotation.

How effective do they perceive annotation to be in improving their reading of texts?

Corroborating Nerlino's (2023) findings about the positive impacts of annotation, student interviews indicated that after an initial period of uncertainty, most felt that annotation improved their ability to identify features and devices within the text. The teacher-researcher's decision to teach annotation explicitly as a critical reading strategy was an important one, as the ability to read critically 'precedes and supports the act of presenting an interpretation' (Poletti et al., 2016, p. 237). Student interview responses and summative assessment results both suggest that the students developed a deeper understanding of the texts when using annotation. The majority felt that it allowed them to read the text in greater detail and that this contributed positively to their assessment performance, a position borne out by the assessment data.

What impact does the teaching of annotation have on assessment performance?

While it is impossible to control for every variable in a classroom setting or to account for personal, social and developmental influences on student performance, the two key differences between the regular cohort and the extension class were: the fact that the extension group was selected on the basis of previous high performance; and the explicit teaching of annotation to this class. The difference in ability between the two groups is reflected in the assessment results for Tasks 1 and 2, which show an achievement gap of approximately 2.68 on a 15-point grading scale. If growth across the cohort were consistent, this gap would not vary significantly over time; however, after annotation was introduced to the extension class, the gap widened to an average of 3.25 marks. Coupled with the student interview responses, this suggests that annotation enabled the extension students to better identify relevant textual features and language devices to inform their responses to the texts in their assessment.

To what extent can the teaching of annotation improve students' critical reading ability and assessment responses?

Overall, our findings show that annotation had a positive impact on students' critical reading ability. Not only did their assessment responses show tangible evidence of growth, which is supported by the teacher's observations in their narrative, there is also evidence of impacts on their confidence in their abilities as critical and independent readers, which is most clearly visible in the interview responses. This suggests that the explicit teaching of annotation as a reading practice has merit in terms of improving both students' independent critical reading skills and their ability to engage with curriculum concepts and terminology.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, this action research project has established that annotation as a critical reading strategy has benefits for both student assessment outcomes and students' confidence in their ability as readers in secondary English classrooms. Put most simply, it supports students in 'reading to understand rather than just reading' (P1). As in other studies, it was found that annotation needed to be active and go beyond simple highlighting to be effective (Fisher & Frey, 2014b), and that while students initially found it challenging, it had positive impacts on their critical reading ability, which then translated to assessment success.

One of the unintended outcomes of the study was the validation of action research as a method for collaborative research between practitioners and academics. Action research as an informal process for teacher pedagogical development is very well established, but it is less often undertaken in partnership with research academics. The natural alignment of the Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect cycle with the day-to-day expectations around curriculum planning and delivery placed on teachers means that the model can be seen as a more formal framing of an already existing process, rather than as an extra, added expectation. The shared experiences of the research team have also highlighted how academic/educator partnerships can be leveraged to develop rigorous research projects that address many of the concerns around practitioner-led action research. In this case, while the teacher-researcher led the annotation project, as reflected in their narrative and planning outline, the academic partner's ability to lead the interviews reduced the risk of bias or undue influence associated with the pre-existing teacher/student relationship. The academic partner's contribution to the data analysis, particularly in the dual coding of interview responses and interpretation of assessment results, also allowed for a more rigorous analysis, as it established a degree of intercoder reliability and enabled objective analysis of the assessment results.

Further Research

Given the cyclical nature of genuine action research, this first iteration of studying annotation for critical reading will be built upon, with key findings noted to further refine the process. Since the first iteration of this project, the teacher-researcher has moved to a new school, which offers new opportunities to assess the generalisability of annotation as a critical reading practice in different educational contexts.

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Story Ground in the Secondary English Classroom

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Abstract: Story Ground is a program run through the University of Canberra Faculty of Arts and Design which provides participants with a safe environment in which to engage with Aboriginal knowledge. Participants are encouraged to respond to the material or topic of a yarn through creative practice; this may take many forms, including print writing, visual art and spoken word. Dr Paul Collis facilitates the sessions and provides culturally and contextually appropriate levels of information to participants. The role of Country is central to Story Ground, and the workshops often run in outdoor spaces. Country is seen as a living participant.

During 2022, Story Ground ran as a program at a secondary school in the Australian Capital Territory. Three English classes from Years 10, 11 and 12 participated in the activities and a study of their effect. Two teacher-researchers collected data to inform an understanding of how the program impacted students' engagement with the subject English. The researchers also conducted interviews to learn how students' entry-level knowledge about Indigenous epistemology and ontology, acquired through Story Ground workshops, supported their critical and creative thinking. This article discusses and contextualises those findings, including through a transcribed 'yarn'. Storying practices and yarning practices are increasingly recognised as legitimate Indigenous research methodologies, and are central to the data collection, analysis and dissemination presented here.

Keywords: creative writing, indigenous studies, cultural integrity, yarning, pedagogy, country, story, Secondary English, English

Story Ground

History and context

Story Ground is an initiative of the University of Canberra Faculty of Arts and Design that began in 2016. It intersects traditional and contemporary Indigenous knowledge and creative practice through tertiary teaching, school and community outreach work, and creative practice research. In 2017–18, based on their experiences initiating this work in tertiary teaching, Dr Jen Crawford and Dr Paul Collis published a two-part article that appeared in two issues of *TEXT*, titled: 'Six groundings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story in the Australian Creative Writing Classroom'. The article opens with the following provocation for tertiary teachers who teach creative writing as part of their role. We believe this provocation should be extended to schoolteachers who teach creative writing – or creative practice – as part of their role:

> In their essay on Aboriginal Dreaming and narrative ecology, 'Different Ways of Knowing: Trees Are Our Families Too', Gladys Idjirrimoonra Milroy and Jill Milroy write that 'All Australian children deserve to know the country that they share through the stories that Aboriginal people can tell them' (Milroy & Milroy 2008: 42). Their position is founded on the understanding that country and story, place and voice are intertwined. If this is so, and much in the history and criticism of literature would agree that it is, we must make space in the Australian creative classroom for the

reading and writing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story. (Collis & Crawford, 2017, p. 1)

Principles

In 2022, Dr Collis and Dr Crawford established six principles for Story Ground. These were articulated retrospectively, but define the way Story Ground has worked and continues to work with Aboriginal knowledge, processes and creative practice in dedicated workshops. They are:

1. Including all. Giving an opening for participation for everyone present and possibly present (and even those absent). Absolute awareness of everyone in a relationship of care.
2. Connecting individually and collectively to place and Country right here. This doesn't require special knowledge, but special knowledge exists and has a special place.
3. An invitation to speak, write, play with what is beyond fact and logic, but which also can contain fact and logic.
4. An invitation to memory, to truth, to the unseen and unspoken. To those who have passed.
5. Being with others in the sharing of story. Stories and the storytellers are essential.
6. Concern and regard for the weight of a story (Collis & Crawford, 2022).

Story Ground in the school setting

My teaching colleague Rosita and I (Andraya) participated in a Story Ground workshop series at the University of Canberra in early 2018. We were privileged to be there as non-Indigenous secondary English teachers, as this particular Story Ground series was for Indigenous participants. We were both transformed by the workshops and excited to think about how the program might work in the secondary educational setting.

In March 2018, I commenced my PhD at the University of Canberra, and my collaboration with Story Ground strengthened through schools outreach. Story Ground moved into the secondary and primary school sectors, initially with students, and soon after with teachers in the form of accredited professional learning. In 2021, Story Ground collaborated with our senior secondary school on an ACT pilot. In 2022, we sought to measure the impact of Story Ground in the English classroom and share those results with other teachers. This article provides discussion of the qualitative and quantitative data collected over a year-long collaboration between our school and Story Ground. The research required human research ethics approval, and was supported by Dr Jen Crawford as an academic adviser and made possible through the ongoing collaboration of Dr Paul Collis. Dr Collis is Director, Indigenous Engagement in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, and an award-winning writer and Barkindji man.

The study

During 2022, Dr Collis ran Story Ground workshops in three English classes from Years 10, 11 and 12. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students comprised part of the cohort. In each of these classes, students were asked to complete a pre-survey questionnaire which established their experience of Indigenous processes or content in the English classroom up to this point in time. Dr Collis ran up to 15 Story Ground workshops with each class, which averaged an hour for each workshop. Students were also invited to participate in three-day workshops held at the University of Canberra during each school holiday break; students from each of the classes attended the workshops, and some returned a second or third time. At the conclusion of the year, we asked students to complete a post-survey questionnaire about their experiences of being part of the Story Ground program. Students also had the option to participate in qualitative semi-structured interviews with the two teacher-researchers. Seven students chose to participate in the interviews, which were recorded and transcribed.

Pedagogies of relatedness and connectedness

Yarning

The first part of this article discusses the history, principles and context of the Story Ground program. The second part of this article is presented in the form of a yarn, commensurate with the Story Ground process in the English classroom. Yarning can be defined as a process where participants bring their stories or perspectives on a topic alongside those of others, and find an aggregate in those perspectives (Yunkaporta, 2019). It is a complex and rich process that may include meandering narrative, gestures and silences. It is not rushed, but takes the time it takes for all participants to reach an agreed understanding. According to Kennedy et al. (2022),

Yarning is grounded in cultural positioning [17] and relationality [11]. Therefore, the application of Yarning will vary based on the context and the researcher (including their social and cultural positioning, and considerations of power and control) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community involved. Similarly, Yarning is not simply the means to collect the data. Decolonising research must address the research process as a whole and centre Indigenous worldviews, values and principles [1, 74]. (p. 17)

Storying is also a recognised Aboriginal research practice. Phillips and Bunda (2018), when speaking of Indigenous research methods, state:

In research, we see storying as sitting and making emergent meaning with data slowly over time through stories ... We see storying as what you do in the propositions/ conceptualisations of research, in the gathering of data with others, in the theorising and analysis of data, in the presentation of research. (p.8)

In the English discipline, story is considered important for its ability to demonstrate something of the lives of others, and of our own lives too. We deconstruct a story for its parts to understand the architecture of writing so that we can improve our own writing and appreciate the skills of authors. But stories take time to create, for a variety of reasons, and students often become overwhelmed when they are asked to write a story as an assessment task.

Importance through interdependence

Story Ground eliminates much concern or fear by flattening concepts of hierarchy, which are often present in the classroom through focus on 'marks' or 'scores', as well as through divided classroom roles (students write; teachers guide and assess). In Story Ground workshops everyone speaks, listens, and writes stories, and marks are set aside, at least for a time. The role of Story Ground is to create confidence in the participants by allowing their creative spirit to emerge – and by honouring that as a process. Relationships are pivotal to the method; as Dr Collis says in the transcribed yarn below, the stories of participants who are often at first almost strangers forge the relationships.

Stories as kin

In her article 'Thesis as kin' (2020), Lauren Tynan proposes 'written knowledge' as a form of kin. We want to provoke teachers to consider how such a concept might disrupt long-held assumptions about knowledge production and transmission in the English classroom – that the assessment task is an objective construct rather than an interrelated entity:

[f]ollowing an Indigenous ontological understanding, how we do things (process) is considered much more important than what we do (product); the integrity of the product is ensured by the integrity of the process (Yunkaporta, 2019). Imagining thesis as kin is about embodying a process of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) towards kin … It is a process of nurturing and caretaking relations, the same I aspire to in my human relations. (Tynan, 2020, p. 165)

The word thesis, as Tynan uses it, comes to mean 'sister'. Relatedness towards a sister occurs through mutual obligation and respect. The relationship doesn't suddenly end when the written task is completed. This provocation asks teachers to connect stories with value beyond assessment and analysis. In Story Ground, students' relationships develop through and with their stories. The stories and relationships can transcend the sessions – or classrooms.

Story Ground supports students to see their creative outputs as kin. The writing emerges as students learn more about Aboriginal epistemology and ontology – though Dr Collis doesn't use those words. Rather, students come to understand that their stories connect them and are connected to them in a web of relations. As Tyson Yunkaporta's 'Five Ways of Thinking' (2019) suggests, the special quality of kinship occurs through interdependence. The connection between entities is maintained through tension and balance; for the relationship to develop, entities must reciprocate sustaining practices. Story Ground supports students to strengthen their relationships with fellow participants and their respective stories, thereby growing relationships in an expanding web of connection.

The complexity of cultural integrity

Before we move to the yarn that demonstrates a form of knowledge transmission and concludes this article, I want to add one more perspective. At the recent UC Autumn Reading Group: Including First Nations Perspectives in the Curriculum, our assigned reading was an article by Lisa Fuller entitled 'Following the song'. As I read the article I was reminded of the challenge of Western academic traditions and how they don't always fit with our respective First Nations cultures:

Years ago, after a one-on-one session with an Aboriginal student, I ran smack-bang into the thought that I'd just become the coloniser. I felt like I'd had my guts ripped open. I debated with myself whether this was a good or bad thing: I was teaching them how to operate successfully within the academy and doing so from our shared perspective. Was that better or worse? I still don't have an answer. This is why I have deep reservations with ideas around 'Indigenising' or 'decolonising' the curriculum. How can that ever happen if it's still set in a white male space? When is it truly yours or different if you always have to work within someone else's framework? And we do have to do that. Just look at how difficult it is, both as creatives and as Blak people, to get our work published in any academic space. That work rarely follows the 'norm' set by white male epistemology, ontology and axiology. (Fuller, 2020, p. 32)

Ideas around curriculum and 'decolonising the curriculum' foster emotive and challenging discourse. Non-Indigenous teachers and students don't know what they don't know about Indigenous epistemology and ontology. How do they effectively learn about this in schools? Where are the alternative models? School funding is often placed into wellbeing programs for Indigenous students at risk – but where is Indigenous pedagogy working beside Western pedagogy in the mainstream English classroom for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students? This is why Story Ground works with schoolteachers, among others, in the education community.

Protocols of relatedness

In order for our yarn to progress with cultural integrity, I'll provide context about Rosita and myself as non-Aboriginal participants. Rosita is a young woman, mother, partner and teacher who worked in law before she came to teaching. Her people are of German and English heritage with close connection to the Northern Rivers in New South Wales. I am a Māori-Dutch woman from the Ngati Porou tribe in Aotearoa New Zealand, with ties also to Zoelen in the Netherlands. I'm a mother, partner, teacher and student. Dr Collis knew this information going into the yarn with us, but it is important that we clarify this with the reader as an example of 'establishing the protocols of relatedness' (Yunkporta, 2019): that is, the protocols of engagement for this paper.

The yarn does not just take place with human participants, as we are all connected to Country, so

Country is part of the process. Rosita is particularly connected to gum trees, while I am in a custodial relationship of obligation with rabbits, who are my 'oddkin' (Haraway, 2016). Dr Collis is in a totemic relationship with gidgee tree and brown kite. Rosita, Paul and I reflect upon the impact of Story Ground at our school. We weave the qualitative feedback with stories. We want these perspectives to sit side by side. We share our personal experiences from the perspective of a collaboration of teachers. We share work written by students, with their permission. Also participating in the yarn is a graduate of the Story Ground program – a former senior secondary student who is now studying a degree at the University of Canberra, the first member of her family to attend a university. She wanted to participate in the yarn to provide a student voice and different perspective. Finally, Associate Professor Jen Crawford provides closing remarks. We hope that our research provides rich ways for teachers to consider the intersection of creative practice and Aboriginal epistemology and ontology.

A yarning methodology

Paul: Hello. Yuma everybody. I'm a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. For the last few years, I've been doing a program called Story Ground.

Andraya (Andi): Our research question is, what new knowledge is generated through students' engagement with Story Ground practices and how might the use of these modalities and protocols inform teaching and learning in the English classroom? It's a big question, so perhaps we can speak about the protocols you establish when you commence a Story Ground workshop.

Paul: Creative writing and the telling and keeping of stories can be really powerful. Also, sometimes, if allowed to run without any rules or protocols, people can get hurt and history can be tortured, and the business of other people who aren't with us might be passed on. We have some rules around the Story Ground practice. One of those is that we can talk about the story but not about the writer or the author. Story keeping, story making and story creating is concentrated on the story itself. When I talk stories of the land and of the Country, the students and other participants respond in words or stories about Country or place; it's really evocative and a powerful connection that they are forming in that moment through their

story and with the story to their Country or to that place.

Those are the main protocols around this practice. Don't speak about somebody else inside or outside of the Story Ground session. You may speak to their creative outputs in a supportive way, but do not comment about the person. I remember one session where we spoke about a significant woman in a person's life. Some students have gone to places where they didn't have parents, or didn't have a mum. Might have been raised with a sister or raised with a grandma or something like that. So the stories are really charged. On the day we wrote about important women, everybody's story was super charged with emotion and not one of them crossed any of those lines, you know. We start with those protocols. We generally write those rules up on the board. There might be four or five of them, and then we stick to it. But the students have come up with those protocols as well, so they're right into it.

Then there's protocols around teaching the quality assurance stuff for teachers, which is accredited. I do five hours of professional teaching with them, using storytelling techniques and Story Ground techniques to place them in a situation of connection to Country, to place, to others, through the storytelling technique.

Storytelling becomes important because it's a way of memory as well. And it's a way of learning that really sinks into the – I'm going to use a very loose subjective term here – it really sinks into the soul of the person, into their heart.

Andraya: And Paul, would you say another one of those protocols is that we're not marking students' work?

Paul: People don't feel that they're under pressure, I've got to do this, and I've got to get it right. It's not about getting this right; it's right because it's coming from them. And with them, and to them. When we go for a cultural walk at UC, we look at a scar tree, for example, or go to the Ngunnawal garden, and start to talk about relationships. Relationships with the Country, relationships within my Barkindji culture.

Then they start seeing through their imagination, this connection with plants and animals and all things in the living world. Sand, places, it's not just dirt. These are sacred things, they're important to us and they start seeing these things.

So, it's evocative to do this on Country. The work's not being judged and assessed, because you're really judging and assessing the self-worth of a person if you're doing that. That's not the point of Story Ground and we've never gone there with it.

Some people have said it's transformative, this stuff has transformed me as a human being. I'll never walk past another tree again without looking to see what it is, where it is and how it's situated in the landscape and wondering about it. It's not just the pretty things that I look at in nature now; I know what it cost people.

Here's one of the veterans of Story Ground who has got into the University of Canberra under a portfolio entry, mainly of the Story Ground work. A wonderful student she is too.

Student: Story Ground was life-changing. Not only did I understand how to express myself through writing, I learned more about Indigenous culture. Story Ground opens your eyes. Story Ground taught me not only to humble myself as a person, but good ways to write about, and to, people.

I don't like that saying, practice makes perfect, that's not realistic. Practice makes improvements and Story Ground shows you that. Story Ground just teaches you to better yourself and to be better at your best. So that's what Story Ground is to me, and what it's done for me in my academic life and my personal life. Story Ground is a life-changer for me. I do think of myself as someone who improves their writing.

Andraya: Could you have imagined that you would be at university a couple of years ago?

Student: No, not at all. I just never would have thought of uni. Only because I always thought of the negative side of my life – living in poverty and I guess living in stereotypes as well, because there's that thing about Polynesian children and saying they're good at dancing traditionally, or they know how to play a specific kind of sport, like footy.

So, I've always thought you know, have a stone as a head, have a strong heart so that no one can break down those walls. And when I got into Story Ground, I completely changed what I was then to what I am now. I'm a softie now. I cry when I write, so that's kind of new. I express myself more now than holding it in, and seeking help is another thing.

Most Polynesian kids, we don't seek help, because we think it's shame. When it comes to academic work or anything that requires common sense or anything to improve yourself, it's kind of shame. It brings shame to

yourself, but not only that, shame to your community. You think, why am I asking this? I look kind of dumb right now. But that's what Story Ground does to you. It changes…it doesn't really change you, but it makes you embrace yourself.

Rosita: Building on those points, two Year 12 students who both come from Indigenous backgrounds talked about the way Story Ground impacted them. One student said, 'As I said before in English, Story Ground helped me not shy away from trying to use more intellectual words in any piece of writing that I'm using. And not to shy away from sounding dumb or misusing a word'. And we went on to talk a little bit more about him feeling confident about a speech he'd written for Reconciliation Day, and he said that he feels confident to do those sorts of things as well, and that Story Ground has been a kind of stepping stone for him.

Andraya: One of our Year 10 students has said this about being part of Story Ground sessions. 'It also builds an environment that incorporates a lot of Indigenous teaching methods and yarning. Yarning is a big part of it. And listening deeply to other people speak. And sharing if you want to. And it can become vulnerable. And I guess because everyone is potentially vulnerable it means that it's easier for you to be vulnerable. And because of that space, you can feel safe'. Paul, my question to you is, when students come into a Story Ground session and they don't know each other, what is the process for building that space of safety?

Paul: I rely on other things. They don't need to know each other, but they'll get to know parts of each other through the stories that they'll tell. So, I will generally lead that stuff. I can be vulnerable when I speak about connections to Country or about me becoming connected to culture, and the strife that I'd been in and how I was supported through that, and that in itself is a story of love and support in teaching.

Young people have been given a hard run, I think, many times. Haven't been really considered that whilst they may be immature to other people's maturity, they're not immature to sensitivities and hurt and heartfelt emotions, to other people or to their culture or their Country. And you know what, we break after the first hour to have morning tea, you've got kids going up talking to each other and sharing stories right

there on the spot. They didn't even know each other's name; they didn't need to.

So, it becomes that safe space, I think, through being led fairly strongly. I do stuff around culture, around the river, around my connection to my life, my cultural spirituality, and my spirituality and my academic life as well, through that technique. And then they get it. Because we've already got those rules up around not to do this, not to do that, they don't come looking to be doing that.

After deep consideration, one of our Story Ground students shared a poem. 'Thank you, Mum, for taking care of us. Thank you, Nan, for taking us in. It was cold in the car.' Now, the person who wrote that, he would not consider himself to be a writer, but he is supreme. What a heart and what a moment. He had something like 15 minutes to prepare for that. After the long lead-up with the story telling and story creation, generally they get about 20 minutes maximum to write. And they get it down.

Rosita: The student that Paul is talking about said in his qualitative interview, 'At first, I thought it was a creative writing program, but going there to the three sessions, it's much different. It's a lot more emotionally connected and it's a lot deeper than just simple creative writing'. I think it was a powerful moment for this student in particular, who started to see himself much more as a storyteller, as a writer, and accept that as a valuable, important part of himself.

Andraya: And another big part of it is being able to write in language. We have students who come from different cultures, and we encourage them to write in the language of their cultural heritage.

Some of the students who go through Story Ground programs traditionally aren't students who succeed at college or high school. They're often the students that do well in Story Ground because it's a different way. And then, once they do manage to transition to university because they've been part of a Story Ground program, because that's part of a pathway for them, when they come to university, it's therefore important that the journey doesn't end there.

Paul: Getting students that probably have never had a parent or a relation even finish high school, complete Year 12, let alone go on to do tertiary studies, at a university or a TAFE college or other places, other institutions, is a massive leap into the unknown.

Rosita: One of the things that has come up most strongly from the post-Story Ground surveys was the connectedness that was built through the Story Ground sessions, and the feeling of connection that was built for students with their peers, with their teachers, with Paul and also with their own cultures and with their own experiences. It helped build understanding and connection with other participants and it helped them to encourage them to be brave.

Andraya: One of the Year 11 introductory units we teach at our college is focused on 'Place'. Students find it difficult to think about a place of importance – they say they don't feel connected to a place. And this is one of the most profound things that comes through our findings, is a sense of disconnection of young people to place, and yet we find that in Story Ground, they rediscover place, or a sense of place comes to have new meaning for them, or through engagement with traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture through storying sessions, they discover how to read the landscape more, because that's part of the learning.

Paul: Maybe some people think their place isn't significant because it might be Housing Commission or it might be a caravan park, or it might be a home that is unlovely or not a big, grand home or something like that. I don't concentrate on what it isn't. I look at what it does. And so, when I walk through the landscape with these students, they start to express these deep admirations and feelings for Country, and connections to Country like those trees, how trees communicate with other trees, how they'll die if they're not within a certain radius of another one of its own species, how they're in communication. They start going, oh he's giving me something I think that I can talk about, because I've got that in my place. And so they start to feel connected and strong about something which they'd probably never spoken about before.

Rosita: I've got a quote here from a student that reads, 'I learned a lot about the Indigenous culture, and now that I look back on it, I guess previously I skipped over it a bit more than I should have. And it's allowed me to recognise more about Indigenous culture in our current world. And appreciate it a lot more as well. I didn't know enough to recognise that in today's world and I also learned a lot about people and their connectedness to culture'.

The student continues: 'I think the most valuable

thing that I took away from the three days was about the Acknowledgement of Country, and about how people would speak acknowledgement of Country but not actually mean it. We wrote during the three days our own and I was really proud of it. I was like, this is the first time where I've sat down and wrote something where I was … I love this and I feel like it needs to be spoken more about'.

Paul: I love it too. I think to give the people the opportunity or anybody an opportunity to refer to Country as something that's truly important and then to express it in a safe space, that becomes a massive moment of change in their life. You won't remember everything when you finish a degree or you finish a year at school, or a year of study. You might remember one thing, and that's one of the things that young person will remember all her life. I'm positive in saying that. That's that transformation stuff that they talk about. Yeah, it is important, they might think to themselves, I'm important. And so, that voice, to hear your voice, whether it's weak or strong to start off with, it's important to start and to have a connection to a Country, to a place, a connection to nature and seeing how nature works. As Bill Neidjie says, 'It works through you, in you'. Meaning nature, starlight, everything works through you and for you. It's like your blood pressure, it's pumping in you.

Andraya: A student writes, 'After the Story Ground sessions, I would frequently speak about it with my family, with my friends'. But the transformation for this student was 'that I would find myself doing an English assignment and from that perspective, ensuring I was really considering the English assignment and allowing myself to be vulnerable with how I was writing creatively from that point onwards'.

Paul: Andi, can I ask you a question? You've been with me, with Story Ground with schools, ever since it started. What do you find as a teacher, Story Ground has done or can do, and or some of the value sets around it? How has it affected you as a teacher? As an educator, more so than a teacher?

Andraya: I think at the heart of Story Ground is relationships. Relationships are paramount and we know that that makes a huge difference in how students will achieve in the classroom. Oftentimes teachers teach. They might not participate in the

activity that the student is doing in the moment. We might ask students to write a story or share a story, but we're not doing the same. Story Ground levels any sense of hierarchy. Teachers who come to Story Ground sessions with students are a part of the circle. They're part of the yarn and therefore in a sense they become just as vulnerable. So students see them in a different light, as having a life beyond what they see in the classroom. They're people together as opposed to the hierarchy of how schools are structured. And teachers can share about their mothers, just like students do in situations where sometimes yeah, there is vulnerability but there's also healing sometimes through that. So, to me, that's something that I've seen most definitely.

Rosita: One of the students in the interviews spoke a little bit about this: 'The fact that it takes away some of the hierarchy and it puts us into a space where we can understand each other as people rather than just as being teacher and student relationships. As students, not as students but as human beings. I get to learn about teachers, through their stories. It's like I get to learn about Andi with her stories about rabbits. Yeah, and with Uncle Paul, you know, it's a great connection to have made'.

And I think that notion of taking out the hierarchy so that students are with you on that journey of creating and writing so that when it does come to things like writing for assessment it doesn't feel like you are assessing their writing from a place of judgement and a place of criticism, but the students are with you on that journey. And what they're seeing as a piece they might submit for assessment is a work that you've guided them through, and a celebration of the success you have with them, rather than them doing something and you judging it.

Paul: I think that word celebration is really important. That celebrating with them something that you've guided them through. They feel it as well, you can see that in the enthusiasm that they have for doing the homework or doing the essay or doing the assignment. It is a very different way of teaching. There's no hierarchy of showing each other your marks, who got an A, who got a B. None of that stuff, because you're all striving the best you can to get this story to be the best it can be, you know.

Rosita: And I think Andi and I have seen an increase in students coming to see us if they don't understand

an aspect of an assessment task. That safety around assessment tasks or drafting. Much more open to the concept of drafting. Much more open to saying, I don't understand how to do this…

Andraya: I think part of that comes from being involved in the Story Ground sessions with students. You are writing with them, so they see you go through a process of writing as well. They see you put the wrong word in and editing it differently. It dissolves the mystery of writing processes.

Paul: The teacher, I'm just another part of a socialisation where we don't put anybody above somebody else. 'It was our stories', this student says. 'It was our stories. It was Paul's stories. It was the people in the classroom's stories, and I guess that made it a lot more impactful than usual. I think Story Ground especially encouraged me to think about things differently and consider alternative ways of storytelling. I think the classes have definitely encouraged me to consider things in other ways and also consider things more in relation to the world around us, how important it is. Not that before it was like, oh, screw the world. But just like now, I think in a different way, and I think it's important in storytelling. I think a lot now about the connection between storytelling and places, which I think helped me a lot with the novels that we read as well'.

Andraya: A really strange phenomenon happened one day in a Story Ground English class towards the end of the year, and I've never seen it before in my teaching career. We had students that were writing around the room, and then they proceeded to read around the room. And then without any of us, me asking or prompting, the writing continued immediately afterwards. And the writing that came out that second time around was call and response poetry. It was call and response through unspoken collaboration. The students became a team writing to each other, almost like poetry of celebration of another person across the room and it came from them. They hadn't had the prompt. And it blew my mind, I'd never seen anything like it.

Paul: I think take away that edge of competition about how good I am, or I can't be as good as them so I'll put them down. Take that out of the situation completely and you get a completely different person in attitude and in actions. I've seen it time and time again. That call and response, that urgency to celebrate and join.

Rosita: I had a similar kind of experience that I haven't had before too, with some Story Ground work with a Year 12 class that I had picked up from another teacher. They're a class who were not comfortable with each other. They had been together for six months but most of them didn't know each other's names. They would not share work; they would not talk in class. Paul came in and did some work with them and they were very reluctant. So they wrote a one-word-at-a-time poem, and they held on to that one-word-at-a time poem, and that process of one-word-at-a-time poetry. Almost every week at least from that point in time, I'd pick up a sheet of paper that was floating around the room and there would be a one-word-at-a time poem happening. And by the time they left, the group had constantly shared with each other. They had built relationships with people that they had never met and this theme of the one-word poem became almost a kind of anthem that ran through. I couldn't have stopped it if I had tried, not that I tried to.

Paul: It was great, wasn't it? It was really great. Might be…one word might be about something that happened today, breakfast. The next person might say bus. Somebody might say bike, things like that. It goes right around and comes back, and they'll do another word. And so, this really creative and intense poem is created which is a collective of their work. There's a lot of bonding in that. Each one is looking forward to seeing, hearing what the next person has said, you know. It's a magic way of teaching. It's a great thing for them. I think it takes a lot of that pressure off kids, too, to do it all alone.

Andraya: A Year 11 student says this: 'This is a bit sad, and it's sad that we missed out on this opportunity of being able to do this kind of thing, to grow up with this passion and these ways of thinking'. She's talking about her primary school experience.

Rosita: Mine is from a Year 12 student who is Indigenous and when talking about what Story Ground has meant to him, he said, 'It means a lot to me because it helps me connect with my own culture. Learning from Uncle Paul how to tell stories, not just mine, myself, but my spiritual self. Myself that's connected to this land. I'm talking from that perspective, not just through my eyes, you know the eyes of an animal, anything really, rock formations'.

Paul: When I hear quotes like that, it's so heartwarming. You can hear kids identifying their Aboriginality for the first time, or expressing it for the first time. That is massive. They wouldn't have done that in an open class.

Andraya: Do you think there's a reconciling action within Story Ground?

Paul: There's a real healing part of Story Ground that reconciles part of their soul, their life, their life that they didn't have, which they wish that they might have had, you know. They start to think beyond, as a student said, it's not just about me but about others as well, the cultural self.

Andraya: How did Story Ground start?

Paul: Dr Jen Crawford came to me and said could you think about helping me, or could we do something about enabling Indigenous students who are having difficulty in either not completing their assignments or not turning up to class. I immediately thought, well if it's because they've got literacy problems, let's do it another way. Everyone can tell a story. Everyone's got stories, so there's nothing in there that they can't do. And it's from that that we started to develop this whole practice.

Jen: I think as far as the modalities and the protocols of Story Ground, that some of the key things that we do are really affirming students in coming from where they're at. We give them a chance to begin with what they have and invite them to take that seriously, that they might have received stories, whoever they are, from their families, from their dreams, from their embodied experiences, and we say those have a place in what we share and value together. So to me, that's a position of strength that we can offer to students that actually enriches everything that we do with them, both in school classrooms and in university classrooms, because it means that whatever other ways of thinking we want to teach them – and there might be forms of academic rigour and scholarship that come straight from that enlightenment tradition – different layers give them multiple places to come from and gives them a sense of self to come with and a sense of connectedness to come with. Both to their own experience, their families, their cultures, but

also connectedness to each other and to us and the classroom.

Andraya: Jen, did Story Ground come into being after you had written the *TEXT* papers?

Jen: Story Ground began with that process that Paul and I went through actually with unit teaching here at the university. And at the same time, we began doing some community-based workshops, so we were doing both of those things at the same time. And that paper we wrote was really an exploration of what does it mean to bring Indigenous story into the formal teaching of creative writing at university? I now very much see that as part of the bigger Story Ground project.

Paul mentioned supporting Indigenous students and yes, that was a serious priority, but the other thing that I was concerned about was supporting non-Indigenous students, inviting non-Indigenous students to step forward out of positions that they may not have been able to reflect on, or may not have had the space to consider from another perspective. So giving them that opportunity to think about how their cultural position was contingent, as all cultural positions are, to give them some contact with other things and to let that really make their writing richer. At the same time, to create a more connected and positive environment for all of us. Because it's no good supporting Indigenous students in the classroom if you do nothing with the other students who might be coming in with some really hard-set ideas and making it harder for the Indigenous students. Before Story Ground I hadn't created that kind of cultural framework where everybody could win, where everybody understood that they were all expanding their own learning.

Andraya: I think that's really important, that sense of grounding yourself or situating yourself and being able to be vulnerable within that, to be the English teacher who says look, I'm not Australian Indigenous, but I'm learning. And there's a space here for us to learn together.

Jen: Yeah, and I think it was fundamental to give it a go, even before I started working with Paul, and then to recognise that moment where like, this is not working, this is not working well. This is creating some risk. And to take the next steps, rather than stepping away from it, and seeking out the appropriate help and going through some really tough discussions about

what we needed to do, to make it meaningful in an ongoing way.

Rosita: A lot of students said the Indigenous texts that they'd engaged with had been either very limited or very surface-level, and I think for me, Story Ground and my experiences with it have given me a much better concept of how I as a non-Indigenous English teacher can work with those texts, because I think all of our kids deserve that opportunity to understand and engage.

I think in a school context, the levelling and reconciling nature of Story Ground is bringing students together and giving them the capacity to engage in different ways of thinking and in the importance of story in a way that's inclusive. That everyone has story, everyone has connection, but also having those teachings of what it means from Paul to be connected to Country, or to write in a way that's connected to Country, I think is pretty groundbreaking.

Concluding thoughts

We propose that teachers consider how 'story' currently sits in their English classroom – how it is valued or experienced by students and teachers. Story Ground shows that story, and story sharing, are core to Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Sharing a story with another is an invitation to become part of that story – to attend to it with care. Story Ground allows teachers to recognise the hierarchy of relationships in the classroom and provides space to reconfigure that through active participation through story telling. In doing so, the value of story and of connectedness transcends the student's experience of story as an activity for assessment, competition or literacy learning. It is instead a way of connecting with the world. The natural world is a storyteller, and perhaps teachers might consider how the natural world factors in storytelling and story making processes in their own classrooms. Uncle Paul often asks: Have you had a conversation with Country lately? Well, have you?

millennia, and the storying practices that have ensured its continuous flourishing. We also acknowledge the land and its myriad of lifeforms as the original teacher.

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Drama and Writing: the Connections

CARRIE HERBERT

The children were scattered in clusters about the classroom; some cross legged; others lying on their stomachs, chins resting in hands; others half sitting on the edge of tables with one foot on the floor—but all actively engaged in discussing a piece of poetry.

As they talked, I walked between the groups catching half sentences, questions and tentative statements:

"No I think that the cat comes in the morning and ..."

"There's no cat in it—it just says like a cat".

"But it says 'little paws', it comes on 'little paws' "

"Yeh but that isn't a cat"

"What's, What's ha-ha-hunches mean?"

"They're like legs. A dog's got haunches when he sits"

Slowly the groups begin to mobilise; some children pull others up with commands like "Come on you be the harbour ...", whilst others float noiselessly between human buildings, standing straight and still. More arguing, more changing, more rehearsing, more clarifying, until group by group they sit back on the floor ready to show in drama how they have interpreted Carl Sandburg's 'Fog'.

> The fog comes
> on little cat feet.
>
> It sits looking
> over harbour and city
> on silent haunches
> and then moves on.

* * * * * *

A group of older children sit loosely in a circle talking animatedly about times they have been involved in conflict situations. They describe in detail who did what to whom, who started it, whose fault it was, how it ended and how they felt as a participant, an onlooker or as a victim. A tough group of year eight students telling anecdotes about real conflict situations, sharing their experiences with each other.

"You should have seen one night at the pub—this man got stuck into this lady and started belting her—I think he must 'ave been

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Carrie Herbert is a drama consultant and teacher at Magill Primary School, South Australia.

drunk. Me dad told me to go home, but I watched through the window — he smashed her in the mouth and someone goes 'get the cops', so they drag him off and blood was coming out her nose and she was crying and screaming and carrying on — but they got in the car and went".

His audience asks for more graphic details — "What did the police do?" "How did it start?" "Who are they?" "Which pub?" and their questions are well answered.

Another one tells a similar anecdote and then they discuss arguments at home, and fights in the school yard.

So it goes on. The teacher continually summarises and consolidates, extending the language and vocabulary and helping them make points and generalities about what they have just heard. She then suggests that it is time to get into small groups. More children can share their stories this way. Later she asks them to begin acting out a scene on 'conflict'. They break and begin to work out group improvisations which are forerunners to some written work they are currently preparing for an "Anthology of Conflicts". They want their plays to be authentic and this method is one way in which ideas can be opened out and explored freely, changed rapidly and scrapped easily. Drama is providing the concrete medium for their thoughts.

*   *   *   *   *   *

Later she asks them to begin acting out a scene on 'conflict'.

A story has just been read to a group of nine year olds. Their wide eyes are filled with excitement and eagerness.

"I want you to get into groups of three and decide which part of the chapter you liked best. You can act it out. I then want you to guess what you think might happen next and make up a play about it."

The kids scramble to their feet, holding onto the arms and jackets of their friends.

"C'mon lets do the bit when ..."

"You be the ..... and I'll be ...."

"We can't decide which bit is the best. Greg wants the first bit, but I want the bit when ...."

So it goes on.

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What is happening here? What role has drama played in developing the thinking, composing and writing processes of young authors in these three windows into the classroom?

In the first scenario we saw a group of children interpreting, through drama, a series of abstract thoughts belonging to another writer. The children came to grips with it by improvising, and through enactment reached an understanding.

By acting out their anecdotes and by gaining rich feedback from their peers, the Year 8 writers will come to a greater degree of authenticity and detail as they begin to get their thoughts and ideas about conflict, down on paper.

The group of nine year-olds are choosing a piece of the story they like best, sequencing it and then predicting what might happen. All these skills (evaluating, sequencing and hypothesizing) are the skills of the professional writer.

Learning the skills and processes of writing is a most important aspect of literacy. The way in which learners come to an understanding of things in the world seems clear enough. First there is the original idea or thought. This is discussed, analysed, tossed about for clarification and accepted as being potentially successful (otherwise the learner won't take up the challenge.) The learner looks at the alternatives available and settles on a plan of action. The plan is tested and reflected upon by the learner before finally presenting it to an audience for critical response. (This is a simplistic model, and in many cases the learner may back-track or repeat stages). This basic process applies equally to composing in writing and in drama.

In expressive drama the sequence becomes idea/concept ⟶ improvisation/modification ⟶ rehearsal ⟶ performance, and in writing: idea/concept ⟶ composing/drafting ⟶ writing ⟶ publishing.

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It was this aspect of ideas ⟶ drafting in the writing process that always lay uneasily in my programming for young writers. The gap between thinking and drafting for me, often seemed enormous. How could we expect young authors to write a story about "What happened at the weekend" or "The Great Mystery", and expect the writing to be original and fluent? Even allowing the clients their own choice of topic didn't help that much. When I look back over the pain and struggles in my writing I am aware of the processes I went through. The struggle and the pain is a very real part of being a writer, as is the talking, discussing, trying out, rehearsing and publishing.

So what value drama? Is the connection between thinking and writing made more tangible through this medium?

Drama is a three dimensional study. It involves learners using resources with which they are already confident: talk, play and action; resources they have been using for many years by the time they are six. By encouraging group discussion and group enactment teachers are actively exploiting children's natural way of coming to terms with the world. Just look at the school playground. It is full of children pretending to be television characters, doctors, nurses, fire fighters, mothers, fathers, and ace footballers. The

Drama is a three dimensional study. It involves learners using resources with which they are already confident : talk, play and action.

children are trying out roles and turning abstract thoughts into concrete reality. So if this technique is being used so successfully and naturally in the children's private world, it would seem important that we use it in a more structured environment in the classroom.

Many children, especially those who are tentative and unsure in the writing process, need to make a bridge between thinking and writing. They need a technique to capture their ideas in an immediate medium; to spin them out, play with them, try them first one way, then another, and talk about them before coming to the task of writing.

Drama is this technique, for it gives children the opportunity of shaping their ideas in a concrete rehearsal. It allows their imagination to become tangible, graspable and finally 'writable', whilst using media with which they feel comfortable: talking, pretending and acting out.

So to conclude. The advantages of using enactment as a bridge between thinking and writing are clear.

- Through drama children can gain immediate verbal feedback from friends and spectators. This develops an understanding of a 'reader audience' for writers.

- Children learn best by 'doing and seeing'. One way of 'doing and seeing' simultaneously, is to use drama.

- Teachers often see writing as a solitary, quiet and isolated process. By encouraging groups of children to use drama we give them the opportunity of spinning and teasing out their ideas in action.

- Children can experiment with and toss about ideas in an immediate way, using skills with which they are already familiar.

- Making up a play involves rehearsal, improvisation, enactment and reflection. By watching and doing these in drama young writers are helped to understand the similar stages found in the writing process.

- Not every drama session leads to writing.

Thus drama can play a significant and vital part in the transferring of the internal thoughts in the head, to the words and sentences on the paper.

Perhaps between the ideas and the written word lies the enactment?

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