



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Conferencing in the time of COVID-19, 2020-2021

2021 Part 2

Vladimir: *To have lived is not enough for them.*
Estragon: *They have to talk about it.*

Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot*

In 2021, VATE continues our conversation begun in 2020, when we declared that *survival is insufficient*. We continue the online format, and, although in retrospect our question, *what do we bring out of COVID-19?* seems premature, even naïve, we affirm the need to talk, to evaluate, to reckon, to assess, and thus to heal. It seems that we have attained a time of reckoning, much of which confronts and defies what has seemed entrenched privilege and its accompanying abuses.

The challenges of 2020 are still with us, and the treasures we hoped for – a sense of renewal, a breath of life that even enforced changes can bring, technological advances – are sometimes accompanied by a sapping of the spirit, an exhaustion of body and mind. We **do** need to talk about it; remote learning can threaten the human need for communication and connection, but we take heart from knowing that the ills of our society lose impetus when exposed and discussed.

Grace Tame, 2021 Australian of the Year, has become symbolic of the empowerment achieved by **talking about it**. Her insistence on being named, thus refusing the gag of a patriarchal legal system, reminds us of John Proctor's anguished question, *How may I live without my name?* Her call for the sound of *One voice, your voice, and our collective voices* is inspirational.

As a society, and as educators, we have been confronted by a phenomenon for which it is difficult to find adequate words – something which seems, literally, unspeakable. One aspect of trauma studies argues *that a traumatic experience challenges the limits of language, fragments the psyche, and even ruptures meaning altogether*. It is, therefore, unsurprising that our language, our modes of writing and reading are being reshaped, metamorphosing in response.

As T. S. Eliot wrote,

For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.

Language becomes richer as new forms are created and explored: blogs, vlogs and podcasts are the diary entries of old, providing 'talking comfort' to help deal with anxiety and despair; First Nations peoples require a truth-telling process and treaties; multimedia offers new ways of reading and writing; our students 'read' games. We can hear the voices of the young holding older generations to account through the legal system, strikes and petitions.

In 1993, Erich Fromm wrote,

A person who has not been completely alienated, who has remained sensitive and able to feel, who has not lost the sense of dignity, who is not yet 'for sale', who can still suffer over the suffering of others ... – cannot help feeling lonely, powerless, isolated in present-day society.

We need **to talk about it**, so that language can continue to connect and empower our students.