



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

English at the intersection: Reclaiming our stories

VATE 2024 explores a world and culture in which we are confronted by the results of 'prolonged stress and isolation'. Naomi Klein's advice in the face of this is to 'gather together, find your footing and your story', to 'create meaning together'. This movement towards and insistence on the importance of community is key.

Recently, a teacher in rural Victoria wrote, in an issue of *Idiom* focused on the sustainability of the profession, that English teachers feel they are 'standing in quicksand, with the ground shifting under our feet, destabilising us, and drawing us deeper and deeper into the system that cannot sustain or support the individual, or the collective – never mind the students who rely on us'. For teachers living in a state of 'constant overwhelm' the collegial community of fellow teachers is paramount in sustaining us. This collegiality is intergenerational: we come together from many different points on our professional journey.

The 'facts' of that 'constant overwhelm' are familiar enough: relentless workloads, understaffing, arid record keeping, regimentation that stifles creativity, rigid 'one-size-fits-all' testing that can be unfair at worst, and inaccurate at best. And now we face the possible 'panacea' of lesson plans designed by experts. To paraphrase Mr Gradgrind that High Priest of Facts, 'Now, Teacher No 20, you know what a lesson plan is!'

Nevertheless, we hope, 'we beat on, boats against the current' ...we persist in telling our stories.

As English teachers, we have manifold stories to tell, drawing from what Seamus Heaney called the 'relationship between nationality, language, history, and literary tradition', as we look to the future remembering our past. We tell the stories of subject English that are inclusive, shifting, resourceful, democratic, and political. We avoid binaries but, instead, are responsive to the push-pull of contending tensions and choices as 'intersections' that demand we exercise our professional judgement individually and collectively. We seek out the space for the playful, the artful, and the experimental in the planned curriculum and 'evidence based' 'scientific' pedagogies.

We affirm the evidence of the lived experiences of our students and their voices, their hopes, passions, curiosities, aspirations, and needs. Inevitably, we err on the side of the imaginative life, expressed through metaphor, allusion, and symbol, to enable students to 'float and flower in (their) season' as Sarah Holland-Batt so eloquently evokes in her poem 'Medusa'. We evoke and celebrate the lines from Brad Aaron Modin's poem which affirms

*The English lesson was that I am
is a complete sentence.*

We accept the challenge of the new and potentially disconcerting, whether it be the ethical and creative implications of the impact of AI on education, or the potency of the misinformation and post truth of social media, even as our TikTok generation of students exploit its creative potentials.



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These challenges are not new. In a sense the profession is always 'at the intersection'. It is twenty-one years since VATE hosted IFTE2003 in Melbourne, where the international English teaching community was invited to explore 'elsewheres of potential' in 'transforming literacies' and 'changing English'. That community considered questions about the kinds of literacies, including embryonic digital ones, required to sustain a democratic society; the problematic nature of English as a global language; a burgeoning textual diversity that challenged established canons and recognised the legitimacy of popular culture and media texts. Most tellingly, the profession was asked to reflect on the importance of their professionalism and collegiality in deliberating on such matters.

In telling our stories, claiming our voices, mapping and drawing meaning from our 'landscapes', we learn from First Nations people, with commitment to community, creativity and human interconnectedness. As a professional teaching association, VATE tells stories that reflect our responsibilities to First Nations people and in so doing, we recommit to the ideals of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its emphasis on reconciliation and truth-telling. One of our challenges is confronting what First Nations educators and authors are telling us about the power of English as a colonising language.

Archie Moore's Golden Lion winning 'kith and kin' at the 2024 Venice Biennale both engages with and transcends the imposed disempowering weaponisation of language. The vast space has become a giant blackboard, covered by the names of his real and imagined ancestors going back 65,000 years. Even the white chalk on the blackboard paint depicts yet subverts a binary racist story. After growing up with no stories, being told his history, one of deracination and dispossession, began with colonisation, Moore has visually countered his people's loss of language and narrative, and created 'a national story, a way of showing we're all connected'

Truly, it is in the shelter of each other that the people live.

2024 State Conference Working Party