



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

## **VATE STATE CONFERENCE** **'coming to voice'**

**Thursday 23 November – Friday 24 November 2023**  
**Deakin University Burwood**

The title of VATE's 2023 State Conference looks back to 2022 when we asserted, 'It's our time' but also, Janus-like, takes us in a sweeping forward movement through to 2023 and beyond. 2022 keynote speaker, Michael Mohammed Ahmad, looked into the future as he provided us with our 2023 title, 'coming to voice'. Building on the familiarity of a 'voice to parliament' Ahmad rejected the notion of a single, racially defined voice, as he referred to bell hooks' claim that 'we cannot begin to talk about freedom and justice in any culture unless we are talking about mass-based literacy movements – because degrees of literacy determine how we see what we see'.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, published in 1994, hooks described her pedagogical practices as emerging 'from the mutually illuminating interplay of anti-colonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies' (p.10). The participle 'coming' enacts this movement, which reflects the active, fluid, and open-ended quality of the drive to the state of 'voice'.

At the end of *Telling Tennant's Story: The Strange Career of the Great Australian Silence*, Dean Ashenden argues, 'We might have got away with the silence had Aboriginal people not declined to disappear from history, as they were once expected – in two senses of that term – to do. The past should be 'put behind us' but it won't be until it has been properly acknowledged, not by fessing up, or by telling just those parts of the story that suit particular purposes, but by telling our story as fully and truthfully as possible.' By emphasising a multiplicity of voices, by acknowledging the ongoing process of 'coming to voice', we also assume the importance of actively *listening*.

English teachers have been conversant with the concept of 'voice' since well before the idea of a voice became such a dominant public issue. It is there as a concept in the way we think about all matters to do with curriculum and pedagogy. It is predicated on an active engagement with the expectation that educators/teachers identify new voices in the linguistic and culturally diverse contexts in which we live and educate. At the same time, it commits to providing safe spaces to ensure that those voices are given the opportunity to be heard AND listened to AND empowered. bell hooks describes 'the more complex recognition of the uniqueness of each voice and a willingness to create spaces in the classroom where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, knowing their presence will be recognized and valued' (hooks, 1994, p.186).



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By looking back, we are invited to assess how far we have come towards 'voice'. It is ten years since Julia Gillard's 'misogyny' speech; now we have a play by Joanna Murray-Smith, *Julia*. Looking forward, the coming to voice can be achieved by decolonising the curriculum, by resisting the sound of a single voice, showing our students the worlds they live in, and by giving them the language to empower them to 'come to voice'. The evocative language of Keating's Redfern speech, and the Uluru Statement from the Heart, can encourage our students to resist, not reinforce, narrow visions of hierarchical 'norms', based on privilege, dominated by one voice. Our classrooms need to be 'location[s] of possibility'.

Twenty years on from the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) Conference, hosted by VATE, we might ask would IFTE's five strands still be capacious enough to contain what we think of as 'subject English'? The five strands were: Literacy for a democratic society; English as a global language; 21st century literacies; English as textual diversity: Literacy as cultural studies; Professional identity and change: The role of English literacy educators in the 21st century.

As teachers we need to engage with these questions, to encourage our students to move from silence to speech, and to speak in a multiplicity of voices, as they construct and recognise their own realities, as they 'come to voice'.