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Paradigm

Paradigm Lost

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NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS

You are most welcome to contribute to *Idiom*. Rather than sending us an unsolicited manuscript, however, it would be best to contact the editors to discuss your contribution. We are keen to receive contributions in a range of forms, combining sound theory with concrete detail about actual classroom situations. All contributions will be reviewed, and you can expect feedback to help you shape your work effectively. Don't be afraid to contact us, as this could be the beginning of a fruitful dialogue between us that will eventually lead to the publication of a worthwhile article.

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Victorian Association for
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Editorial

Hugh Gundlach

At a VATE Publications Committee meeting, a Council member had brought in a large pile of *Idiom* back issues, wondering what we should do with them. Having taught *Fahrenheit 451* to my Year 11 class that day, I rather rudely suggested we burn them! I was being facetious, of course, but that sentiment was the beginnings of this issue, 'Paradigm Lost', as shortly after my outburst I was put in charge of editing this issue!

Like John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost,* we encouraged you, our members, to identify idolatry in English teaching and be bold enough to say something blasphemous. What could the teaching of English be like if we threw out all the traditional or widely-held assumptions, values and practices, and started afresh?

Only one year into English teaching and beginning to adopt some teaching 'habits', I feel like I have already lost a little bit of the creative 'edge' I had as a teaching candidate, where I was ready to try anything. Self-censorship is perhaps the most dangerous kind of idea suppression. I am pleased to share these provocative contributions from our members, many of whom are early career teachers. John Marsden and representatives from Laneway Learning and Bell Shakespeare also share their insights about organisations that challenge conventions, experiment with teaching and learning styles, and reinvent themselves regularly.

As educators, we aim to ask deep, thought-provoking questions of our students. Asking these same questions of ourselves and our profession is equally powerful. I hope the ideas and opinions within this issue prompt reflection on the assumptions, beliefs, values and practices of your teaching. We encourage you to support, critique and share the ideas in this issue on LinkedIn and Twitter. On Twitter you can reply to VATE (**@VATE_English**) and the authors directly. Be sure to use the hashtag **#vateidiom**. Start a debate, continue a conversation, kill it with 'trolling', just get engaged. *Idiom* is no sacred cow!

It is an exciting time to be involved with VATE, as we are in the process of revitalising our website and our publications and communications. In a significant brainstorming session, the Council asked the very powerful question of VATE's service to the teaching profession, 'What if…?' I have really enjoyed compiling such a diverse range of ideas and insights. I hope you appreciate a new perspective on our wonderful profession after reading them.

Best wishes for Term 4.

Hugh Gundlach
Contributing Editor
Member VATE Council

Paradigm lost

What if we only gave feedback that made a difference to students' learning?

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You need to explore your ideas in greater depth.
You should also work on your expression.

Comment from a teacher on a student's practice essay

As English teachers with combined teaching experience of 30 years in the classroom, the two of us have given plenty of feedback to students over the years. For most of that time, we have sweated over essays, identified mistakes, circled errors, scribbled comments on how to improve, and returned students' work with what we saw as rich, meaningful feedback. But how effective was all that labour-intensive, detailed feedback? Did students improve as much as they could have as a result of receiving such comments? What if we started considering alternatives to the conventional ways of giving feedback to students? More specifically, what if we started to give feedback with the view that all students are capable of learning and therefore we do not give feedback based on the premise that the student is 'at their level'. In other words we should not be preoccupied with what we think they are capable of achieving. What if we all, as English teachers, adopted a triad formative feedback principle feeding back but also feeding up and feeding forward? Thus, feedback would no longer look like a 'post mortem' (Wiliam 2011) but rather a proactive, responsive, individualized and considered diagnosis (educational pathway) designed to close the learning gap.

What does the research tell us?

There is a substantial body of research into what effective feedback and assessment might look like, and that research makes it clear that if we want students to learn from the feedback, then we should avoid evaluative information such as letter grades or numbers on a scale. One of the more influential and thought-provoking studies in this field was conducted by Ruth Butler in 1988. In Butler's study, three groups of students completed the same task – a language and logic task – but received different forms of feedback. Group one received a brief comment on how to improve, Group two received a score, and Group three received both a score and a comment on how to improve. Students were assessed again two days later, with somewhat surprising results - shown in *Figure 1* below.

Group one recorded an average improvement of 30%, and Group two recorded an average improvement of 0%. So far, the results may have been predictable; however, the Group three students also received an average improvement of 0%. In other words, the inclusion of the letter grade with the comments effectively neutralised any potential of improvement from the comments. Furthermore, when asked if they wanted to try another task, a majority of Group one students said yes, while a majority of students in the other two groups said no. So the inclusion of a score killed the intrinsic motivation that students initially had to engage with the task. Butler claims that 'while many teachers seem to feel that any negative effect of grades can be overcome by adding a personal comment, the present analysis suggests that this practice affects interest and performance much as do grades alone' (Butler 1988). In other words, once you put a grade on a piece of work all further feedback (written or verbal) is nullified.

Figure 1: Summarised findings of Butler 1988

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Feedback provided	Brief comment	Score	Brief comment and score
Average improvement	30%	0%	0%

What are the consequences of this research on our teaching?

The ramifications of this research result should compel us to stop and reflect on our practice as English teachers. How often do we combine detailed feedback on how to improve with a letter grade or numerical score? If we accept that doing so makes any improvement less likely, shouldn't we start to question this long-standing tradition of English teachers laboriously identifying mistakes and writing feedback on essays that will then be given a numerical score or letter grade? Geoff Masters has recently argued that letter grades should be abandoned altogether, in favour of alternative ways of providing feedback to students and parents on student learning. Masters claims that the use of evaluative grades or scores is highly problematic for a range of reasons:

> [This approach] often is no better at helping students understand the relationship between effort and success. It often does not provide students with stretch challenges. And it often encourages fixed mindsets about learning ability (Masters 2013).

Masters' advocacy of alternatives, in particular in relation to measuring growth rather than achievement, will hopefully result in schools adopting more purposeful ways of recording and communicating progress in the future. In the meanwhile, we, as English teachers, should consider how we give feedback so that we do not continue with a practice that we know is not only not effective, but even counter-productive (reducing student engagement with the task). While we recognise that we are all working within an educational structure where marks are mandated in semester reports and through external examinations, as English teachers we have autonomy over how we give the feedback to our students. This means that we can withhold the marks for some time to give students time to make productive use of the feedback.

How effective can feedback be in moving students' learning forward? We know now from John Hattie's meta-analysis of what works in teaching and learning that the effect size for feedback is significant; however, he and Gregory Yates have also made it clear that when teachers and students talk about feedback, they often mean different things:

> Teachers claim to give students high levels of feedback on their work, but students say that this is not what they experience…Students tend to be future-focussed, rather than dwelling on what they have done beforehand and left behind…Often, what a teacher intends as helpful critical feedback turns to personal ego evaluation in the eyes of the receiver (Hattie and Yates 2014: 65).

Hattie and Yates call this an 'empathy gap' and add that 'students ignore a teacher's copious comments on written work, which they find irrelevant to their moving forward'. Research such as this suggests that we need to think carefully about the sorts of feedback we use, making sure that it is having an impact on student learning. Thus, feedback needs to have personal meaning for each student for it to have impact.

What formative feedback techniques can you use in the classroom tomorrow?

Over the past few years, the two of us have started adopting a broad range of strategies for giving feedback, with the guiding principle being to try to have an impact on student learning. Much of this has involved the use of formative assessment, including written feedback on student work. The most significant use of feedback has involved strategies used within the classroom, during class time. For example, miniature whiteboards have been used on a daily basis in class to ask students to answer questions. Their immediate answers have functioned as feedback from students to the teachers on how much they have understood, allowing us as teachers to respond accordingly by adapting our teaching to that information. This practice has also made it possible to give students feedback based on what they have demonstrated on their miniature whiteboards. For instance, if each student writes a sentence on their miniature whiteboard in response to a question from the teacher, then the teacher is able to give different feedback to different groups of students depending on what mistakes or misunderstandings they have identified. Unlike some other forms of feedback, this involves very limited threat to the student's ego, and allows them to erase their mistake and act on the feedback immediately. It does not involve the teacher collecting piles of practice pieces of writing to mark at home and (hopefully) return at a later date.

Similarly, the use of immediate, minute-by-minute feedback in class gives the teacher the option of changing the pedagogy used more purposefully in class. An example of this that we have used involves doing two quizzes in class. Students gain a result after peer-marking their first quiz on some material covered, and then pool their scores in groups of four. They are then given ten minutes to teach each other in their group what they need to know before completing a second, similar quiz. Once the second quiz has been peer-marked and the scores collated, then the teacher is in a good position to measure the growth between the first and second quiz. Having done this on numerous occasions, we have found that many students can improve from a score of 10-20% in the

first quiz to a result of 80-90% in the second quiz. This is a level of growth that is almost unthinkable if the teacher had not used peer-teaching to activate students as instructional resources for each other. (For more examples of how to do this, and an overview of the research underpinning it, see Wiliam, 2011). This practice, and other uses of peer assessment and self-assessment, have the added advantage of gradually building resilience and self-efficacy in students as they take more ownership over their own learning.

Still, comments on written work clearly have the potential to move a student's learning forward in a meaningful way, so how can we avoid wasting time on too much of what students see as 'fault-finding' and instead use such opportunities to show students what to do next? We have experimented with a few options. One strategy involved skimming students' practice essays while looking for patterns of mistakes and errors, then writing a comment on each student's essay about what those patterns were, as well as two or three strategies for improvement. This meant not identifying every mistake in the essay, instead focusing on a few areas of improvement. At the start, this takes some getting used to as we tend to want to point out each mistake in the text; however, if the negative feedback is too overwhelming students would be more likely to disregard it as too threatening to their ego, and too difficult to process at once.

Another strategy which we have used is the worked example approach. As we know from the work of Dylan Wiliam, providing students with worked examples is important as it provides the students with a road map and a direction of where their learning is going. Of course, we often use high level model responses and use the comment feature in Word to explicitly showcase the thinking evoked in the response. However, it is equally important to show them a medium level response and critique that one as well. What many of our students find difficult is finding a way to close the smaller learning gap from a medium to a higher level. The strength in this strategy rests in giving the students time to critique other responses using the success criteria. Unpacking and interpreting the criteria with the students and showing them how to apply it to student work is equally important for this formative feedback to be most effective.

Clearly, English teachers will not stop reading essays or giving feedback on how students can improve; however, if we continue to study the research into what forms of feedback have greater impact, then we should be able to work smarter, not harder in the future. More so, it is counterintuitive to provide feedback which does not empower the students and instead engenders reliance on us as the teacher. Further, there is little point in continuing to spend time identifying every single error to students, only for them to ignore such feedback. Rather, we need to consider ways of collaborating effectively with students to take note of clusters of errors, and how students can write more effectively next time. Again, we must return to what Hattie has posited as the central question of all feedback: 'Where to next?'

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Lars Andersson

Michelle Maglitto

What if the end of school assessment for English was writing a book?

Elise McGarvie, Our Lady of Mercy College, Heidelberg

Imagine an English Literature curriculum that was concerned solely with enabling students to be exposed to, and to create, literature. Imagine students treating their English Literature class as an opportunity to read, share, and discuss whatever they wanted. Imagine an assessment task that enables students to participate in the tradition upon which the discipline was founded: writing books.

Aims

The course would aim to develop students' love of reading into a deeper understanding of the skills and tools required to write a book themselves. It would provide an opportunity for students to engage with a wide variety of texts of various genres by various authors with the ideal aim being to read as many different titles and styles as humanly possible. Students would be encouraged to read fiction and non-fiction books. The work involved in writing a book could contribute to students' capacity for textual interpretation, deconstruction and analysis, organisation and planning, as well as fostering creativity and imagination. Writing a book requires the development of research and communication skills, as well as deeper understanding of the human condition. The possibilities for learning are endless.

Structure

Ideally, the course would be two years in length. In the same way a university thesis requires a period of research and a period of crafting, so too would this course be divided equally into a Research and Development phase, followed by a Creating and Presenting phase. The Research and Development phase would involve students reading as widely and as prolifically as they possibly could within three terms. This would be interspersed with Share and Discussion sessions that would encourage the students to be criticising or recommending the books they have read. They would be provided with limited instruction in regards to what to read, but may be given direction in regards to the varieties of genres that are available to them. For example, a student who is very familiar with Dystopian literature may be encouraged to discover Historical, Bildungsroman, or Biographical literature. In the final term, students would submit a 2,000 word genre study that would detail the common and unique elements that their chosen genre contains using examples from the texts they have read throughout the year. For example, if their chosen genre was Historical Fiction, then they would need to consider such things as the historical event or period around which the story was set; the components that bring the setting to life; the role (if any) that the protagonist plays in the historical event; or the way in which various historical figures are represented. They might take examples from such novels as *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel, *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, or *Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks. This part of the course would ideally inform the students about the various elements that they would need to consider when approaching their own work. Therefore, it would be recommended that the genre on which they reported would also be the genre within which they wrote for their final assessment. Over the first year, students would be encouraged to continually brainstorm and plan the kind of novel they would like to write, with ideas and inspirations recorded in weekly journal writing. The Creating and Presenting phase of the course would involve both independent construction of the book as well as writing workshops in class. Ideally, students would already have an idea about the story they wished to share, therefore the Creating unit would focus on planning: storyboarding, character mapping, research, etc, with the Presenting unit focused on construction of the final draft.

Assessment

In order to assess a 40,000-50,000 word manuscript for every student, the work would have to be broken up into stages. Therefore, a detailed plan would be assessed, as well as student-nominated 2,000-word excerpts to be assessed at three points throughout the year. Simultaneously, students would be working in editing teams, so that part of their workload would be reading and giving feedback on the work of their peers. Students with highest marks would be forwarded to an external assessment body that would then nominate the top 10 in the state to be published, along with the corresponding genre study from Research and Development.

Elise McGarvie

WHAT IF ENGLISH TEACHERS STARTED THEIR OWN SCHOOL?

Interview with John Marsden

www.johnmarsden.com.au

John Marsden is an award-winning writer whose books, including the 'Tomorrow' series, have sold over 5 million copies worldwide.

He is also a teacher and founding Principal of Candlebark School in the Macedon Ranges. Set on 1100 acres of bush, it enrols 150 students, with 20 full-time, part-time and visiting faculty.

The school culture is to 'try to say "Yes" as much as possible – yes to new ideas, yes to experiments, yes to innovations.'

Idiom: Many people know of you through your fiction-writing career, but you have had many different jobs in your life. There is a theory that Shakespeare's rich imagery may be explained by his knowledge and experience from many different professions. Did your varied work experiences play any role in your personal development or writing?

Marsden: I certainly didn't plan it that way, and during those years when I couldn't settle to anything, I was depressed and frustrated by what I saw as my failure to achieve. Yet now, yes, when I look back, I can see that I was actually acquiring a rich data bank of material which has proved invaluable to my writing. Thanks for mentioning me and Shakespeare in the same sentence!

Idiom: Before writing professionally, you began a career in teaching. How did you manage to write a novel while performing all the duties of a teacher?

Marsden: I wrote *So Much to Tell You* during the school holidays. During term time all my creative energy went into teaching (and still does) so writing was never an option. I always felt that if I wasn't pouring all my creative energy into teaching, then I was probably short-changing my students.

Idiom: Did your teaching experiences help you write for young people in any way?

Marsden: Teaching enabled me to get a sense of what young people are 'into', so it led me to believe that I could write books which they might find engaging. It also gave me the opportunity to pick up on the 'voices' of young people, which helped me create more believable characters.

Idiom: *South of Darkness* is your first novel for adults. What changes have you made to your writing process or content for this new project?

Marsden: For me, the major differences in writing for young people, rather than adults, are the pacing of the book, the vocabulary, and the treatment of sex. In books for teenagers, I rattle along faster, use slightly more accessible words, and, rightly or wrongly, treat sex more conservatively.

Idiom: Did you imagine any of your works would be used as 'booklist' fiction?

Marsden: No, I had to study Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy when I was at school in the 60s, and by the 80s not much had changed. I think it's great that contemporary Australian novels are now on book lists.

Idiom: More than twenty years after first being published, how does it make you feel to see *Tomorrow, When the War Began* still on school reading lists?

Marsden: It's incredibly exciting to realise that it still works for readers in 2015. Something happened the other day that seemed highly significant to me – a woman and her daughter approached me, and the daughter told me how her mother had read my books as a teenager, and had now passed them on to her. This was the first time I'd had this kind of 'generational change' conversation. The daughter spoke so passionately about the *Tomorrow* series. It was deeply moving.

Idiom: You wrote your first novel at Geelong Grammar's Timbertop campus. Did the culture and nature of the Timbertop experience sow any seeds for Candlebark?

Marsden: Yes, Timbertop taught me a lot, but most of all it made me realise the amazing levels young people can achieve if they are challenged. The kids there had only one thing in common – that their parents could afford the fees – but no matter their physical development, physical fitness, mental resilience, outdoors experience, personality etc., they all completed extraordinary physical challenges whilst at the school.

Idiom: In 2006 you founded Candlebark. What prompted you to do this? What sort of thinking and values lead to the creation of the school culture?

Marsden: It was partly my sense that conversations with teenagers were becoming so boring, and I felt it was because they had nothing to talk about except what they'd seen on TV the night before. I realised that their modern lifestyles did not allow for first-hand experiences and wanted to start a school where children would acquire stories from first-hand experiences. I was also keen to demonstrate that a different model of schooling would work more successfully than the usual Western model, which struck me as broken – broken beyond repair.

It's not surprising that it doesn't work, given that it is purely economically driven: the model is to take the greatest number of children possible, jam them into the smallest space possible, and assign the fewest number of teachers possible to look after them. How can that work?

Idiom: How would you describe the learning experience at your school?

Marsden: The timetable looks reasonably conventional, but it conceals the fact that we have so much extra 'stuff' going on all the time. Today, we have two visiting kids from Alaska sitting in on Grade 4 and Year 8 classes respectively.

The Prep and Grade 1 classes have made dinosaur costumes and gone to Scienceworks to see a dinosaur exhibition.

The Grade 2 class are at an orange juice factory in Craigieburn.

Grade 5s have a sleepover here tonight, for no particular reason… Yesterday we had a visiting string quartet from Singapore playing a concert for all the kids. Tomorrow night is a Grade 1 sleepover. These are just typical days in the life of the school.

Idiom: Such a project could have attracted skepticism. Did you have founding supporters, or critics?

Marsden: The only supporters were the people from Fitzroy Community School, who were wonderfully helpful and encouraging. They gave me a lot of practical advice, all of which proved accurate and wise.

The other people I'm grateful to were those brave souls who accepted teaching or management/support roles in a school that didn't exist, and those brave souls who enrolled their children. Ten years later, five of the eight original staff (including me!) are still here, but only one of the 53 students!

Our early critics were the VRQA (Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority), who seemed to visit with the attitude of 'What can we find to criticise?', and three local residents who objected to a new school being in the district. One of their complaints was that they would be disturbed by 'the shrill voices of young children!'

Idiom: What thinking, attitudes and cultures create and sustain Candlebark?

Marsden: One of the most powerful things we do is search for teachers who have had a range of life experiences. I don't want a staff room full of people discussing the best colour choices for their next dishwasher.

Among our teachers is one who was in the New Zealand Navy for years, another who grew up in Argentina and has walked the full length of the Andes, another who did her Masters in Finland, another who has published books of poetry, another who has composed major pieces for various ensembles and orchestras.

Last summer holidays, one teacher did a course in taxidermy, another did a course at Monsalvat to learn to make his own guitar, another went to Iran. Our staff are fascinating, adventurous and creative people.

Idiom: Almost ten years on, what have been your proudest successes with Candlebark?

Marsden: I feel that we've proved that this model is clearly superior to the existing one. For the same amount that students at government schools cost, we provide an education that is engaging, motivating – and successful, no matter what criteria or tests you apply.

Idiom: Could the Candlebark philosophy and practice become mainstream? Do you wish you could extend from P-8 to older year levels?

Marsden: It always amuses me to see how quickly teachers from other schools and other systems find reasons – excuses? – for not replicating what we do here. Adopting this model is really very simple.

Firstly, you need to put out a strongly worded, highly specific statement about the way your school operates, not only so that people know what to expect, but also to give parents an impression of strength and confidence.

Secondly, you should require all parents to give generic permission for excursions and incursions, rather than the current unwieldy system of separate permissions for every event.

Thirdly, you need to encourage teachers to get students out and about, and you need to stack the school with as many interesting and unusual visitors as possible.

Just these three things alone make for a pretty good start!

We are expanding to Year 11, on a different campus, next year, and Year 12 the following year.

Idiom: John Marsden, thank you for your time.

Marsden: Thanks for asking me.

On Candlebark's website there is a section outlining their approach to English that could readily apply to English teaching:

> Implicit and explicit in our teaching of language is the understanding that English is an infinitely malleable tool. It can be made to do anything. It is for the user of language to determine what he or she wants English to do, and then to make the language do it. It is not for English to bully us; rather, it is we who should bully English.

John Marsden

What if classrooms were virtual?
Virtual Learning of Creative Writing: Tweets and All

Nerissa Marcon, St Helena Secondary College @MarNerri

Picture an educational landscape where virtual teaching prevails over traditional classroom instruction; a world reminiscent of Guy Montag's lounge room in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, where screens stimulate the mind with constantly streaming visuals and luminescent light – a never ending supply of entertainment and communication. This time though, the purpose is to educate from afar, using currently available technology, where teachers facilitate literacy learning from the comfort of their homes to students learning from potentially anywhere in the world.

I recall the *2014 Digital Writers' Festival*, where I was able to watch writers from all over our country writing a novella, all while seated at my kitchen table at home. A writer typing in real time was able to project her creative process onto a big screen behind her, and simultaneously to cyberspace. From my home, I was able to see precisely what she was constructing on my own computer's screen via a live web link. What was even more impressive was the audience's input into the narrative. Using Twitter, audience members, both physical and virtual, were able to tweet suggestions for the story, and the writer had access to these tweets as she was writing. Within minutes, the writer added my suggestion to the narrative, and my influence had been stamped into the event.

Using this same concept, imagine now that I am ready to teach from these same confines: my kitchen table, via my device. My students, who are all over the world, have been asked to contribute to our creative writing session on the topic of 'The Future.' As I write, their tweets start streaming on my device and I weave their suggestions into my real-time narrative which they can see on their own screens. I voice the words out loud, creating audible tracks of my thinking to show students how I am constructing the text; showing them how writers write: the places where we need elaboration with description, the places where we need to add pace using short sentences and so on. I use metalanguage in my verbalisations of the text's direction, referring to the protagonist and the linear structure – heeding my students' ideas. The setting too is chosen by combining students' ideas: a woodland extends to a high rock face, which falls to a

thunderous shore and crackling waves. Finally, the narrative must end with a surprise, I tell my students, prompting a flurry of highly engaging and innovative input.

The students know that the final product will be proudly published online – on a class blog, ebook, pdf or other digital form – and available for parents to read as our authentic audience, alongside the recorded video of the entire session; useful to replay for revision or if students are absent. This was the first lesson modelling how to construct a short story for online students in our virtual learning space, and from here, students can volunteer to take part in writing a new piece, in the same way I did. This process of virtual writing has allowed me to show my students the features of short story writing – the elements involved – as well as enabling them to be active participants, via Twitter, in constructing the text.

Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* may have warned about the hazards of effulgent screen time inhibiting meaningful communication, but in this instance, the screens – computer, device and phone – prove to be valuable communication tools for virtual, 21st century learning of creative writing, tweets and all!

Nerissa Marcon

What if the text had no text? Disrupting the VCE English classroom with a good, old-fashioned serial

Ashleigh Gilbertson, Swifts Creek P-12 School @ACPGilbertson

Last term, I asked my Year 11 VCE English class to gather around for their first experience of a new text. Gather they did, not in a reading circle or around a screen, but around an iPhone and speakers playing the podcast, *Serial*. 'One story told week by week', *Serial* is the story of journalist Sarah Koenig's reinvestigation of the 1999 murder of an American teenager, Hae Min Lee. In the twelve episodes of Season 1, Lee's ex-boyfriend, Adnan Syed, has been convicted of the crime and is serving a life sentence, but Koenig's investigation – tantalisingly reported in near real-time – shows that many questions remain unanswered, including that of Syed's guilt. Midway through the first episode, I realised it was going to be a special unit. My mixed-ability, mixed-motivation class was riveted by the story. They remained riveted through a further twelve episodes over six weeks. I had successfully disrupted my English classroom with the medium of a few generations ago: audio.

I taught *Serial* as part of Area of Study 2: Creating and Presenting, within the Context of Justice. As such, our focus was on how Koenig's choice of language and structure was influenced by form, purpose, audience and context. We examined how Koenig adapted the classic storytelling structure of hook, orientation, rising action, climax and falling action to the form of a podcast, and charted the season's transformation from the genre of true crime to character study. We debated whether Koenig's purpose was to achieve 'justice' or merely to entertain, and the ethics of being riveted by a real – not *CSI* – murder. We also considered Koenig's immediate audience for this story of a Muslim Pakistani-American possibly ill-treated by the justice system: a post-Ferguson United States.

Our school assessed coursework for the unit was a portfolio of three texts, planning, reviewing, editing and reflecting on an oral presentation. Students adapted the classic storytelling structure for their own stories of justice and injustice – often simple, compelling, personal stories. This kind of creative oral presentation is an option in the new VCE English Study Design due for implementation in 2016.

Serial can be streamed free from the official website serialpodcast.org or downloaded free from apps like Podcasts (iOS) or Stitcher (Android). The 12 episodes range in length from 28 to 56 minutes – perfect for single or double lessons – and their availability means some listening can easily be assigned for homework. I supplemented *Serial* with extracts from the podcasts *Slate's Serial Spoiler Specials*, *StartUp Podcast*, and *This American Life*.

Serial received a 2014 Peabody Award and was described in the citation as an 'audio game-changer' downloaded nearly 60 million times. Teaching *Serial* was an opportunity to stretch my students with a sophisticated adult text that is, ironically, largely about the lives of teenagers their own age – fifteen years ago.

Serial has a satisfying ending but – Spoiler Alert! – turns out *not* to be a whodunit. While I tried to manage students' expectations, some undoubtedly felt let down by the final episode. This provided an opportunity to revisit our work on genre and the nature of justice. Overall, I found *Serial* to be a singularly engaging text for my Year 11 VCE English students that – as a bonus – also built a strong foundation for Area of Study 3, Using Language to Persuade.

Further reading

Advice for teaching *Serial* can be found at
http://www.mrgodsey.com/search/label/Serial

Ashleigh Gilbertson

What if we let students play?
Why deny the obvious child?

Kate Ellis, Preshil, The Margaret Lyttle Memorial School

Paul Simon's song 'The Obvious Child' laments a bygone childhood and an adulthood of bills, and 'thinning hair'. It speaks of how 'some fled from themselves' as they became adults, 'or struggled to get from here to get there'. A child who had 'a lot of fun' becomes a 'dog that's lost its bite'. If adulthood is such a serious time, why do we deny this obvious child in the education system? Why do we pressure primary and secondary students into an academia once reserved for university or into depressed and 'ready to retire' working class citizens akin to Wily Loman's character in Arthur Miller's classic *Death of a Salesman*, before they have even reached the age of eighteen?

Current education guru Sir Ken Robinson wrote to this in his 2011 article 'Transform Education? Yes, We Must' saying:

> *I'm always struck by how many adults have no idea what their real talents are, or whether they have any at all. Many people just do what they do with no particular passion or commitment to it.*

It is no wonder therefore that there are increasingly growing numbers of young people experiencing crippling levels of anxiety and depression all over the world. They are being subjected to a life as children that we complain about as adults.

In their paper 'A Systematic Review of Universal Approaches to Mental Health Promotion in Schools', Wells, Barlow and Stewart-Brown suggest that this growing level of anxiety can be 'an important determinant of educational and social outcomes' (2003: 197). Children's wellbeing, including their academic wellbeing, is suffering at the cost of a vast number of educational institutions fast-tracking (or not acknowledging) very important parts of their development such as social and emotional learning, learning that is often achieved through play.

Play, a term 'colloquially used to describe various activities and behaviours that children engage in (and is generally agreed upon as) enjoyable, fun, intrinsically motivated and self-directed' (Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers 2012: 49) is

key to educational reform as much as the wellbeing of children and future generations of adults as it gives more opportunities for experimentation; relationships that involve the best kind of communication (where listening is as active a role as responding); mistakes; critical thinking and fun. Play also encourages deep levels of attention, sensual and full-bodied sensory experiences in classes including subjects generally considered 'academic'.

English is widely regarded as an academic subject across junior and secondary levels. Compulsory up to and including Year 12, it moves from handwriting, spelling and grammar to different genres of writing such as creative and persuasive, expository and analytical. What if teachers married the 'seriousness' of English learning with play? What if students were to engage in a more embodied praxis of learning akin to drama in order to make sense of sometimes dry and abstract areas of grammar? And what if students were to have the opportunity to make sense of a character's emotional state in the text they are studying through games? What if English could be taught outside with physical movement? What if these sorts of questions were not asked just by progressive or creative teachers, but also by those that dream up AusVELS?

Wattchow and Payne's 'Slow pedagogy' (2008) focuses on the importance of the body in education as a necessary balance to the 'fast pedagogies' that 'threaten to overrun and exhaust teachers and students at every turn.'

> *Slow pedagogy is about spending time in places for more than a fleeting moment so that we can listen and receive meaning. It is about creating authentic educational experiences that move us into a deeply reflective space where we not only focus on the 'learning mind' but also on the 'sensuous physicality of the body' as we make new meaning in the world. (Wattchow and Payne 2008)*

Slow pedagogy draws us back into the sensuous and into our own bodies in ways that re-engage us with life and the living world (Abram 1997). To introduce sensuality into an educational environment is indeed a moment for teachers

to pause but that is only because sensuality often conjures ideas pertaining to sex. But sensuality, as defined by various dictionaries, is about gratifying the senses, about arousing appetite, about experience (often worldly) and pleasure.

It's finger painting as opposed to fine line drawing.

It's taking a moment to enjoy the smell of food before you eat it or make a decision on an item of clothing based on how the fabric feels against your skin.

It is play.

Could it also mean being given the opportunity as a student to enjoy the taste, almost literally, as they discover and explore new words?

Could it also mean acting out a verb (they are after all a *doing* word) or being taught adjectives by journeying outside to conjure up an individual description for the very weather they are being asked to use an adjective for?

This playful way of educating English as well as other academic subjects sees students in a place of deep attentive learning as it captures all the senses they have available to them and by extension, the very senses that provide a richer, more passionate experience of life in and outside a school's environment (if turned on and used more regularly). In this regard, the very things Sir Ken Robinson discusses in his book *The Element* as much as in his *TED* talks, that of children having more opportunities to find what it is that drives them as individuals, to *do* what they love, have the potential to occur as they have some sense of what passion feels like.

Fun.

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Kate Ellis

WHAT IF WE MOVED BEYOND ROTE REGURGITATION IN VOCABULARY LEARNING?

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THE PARADIGM

English learning has changed drastically from what I experienced as a teen, and I'm only in my mid-twenties. Students can now publish their writing for a global audience, study or create multimodal texts, and easily collaborate with their peers online. English pedagogy currently prioritises active, peer-to-peer learning, yet many teachers still rely on one of the most dated forms of pedagogy to teach one element of English in particular. The strategy is rote learning: mechanically or habitually revising and repeating something until it is remembered. The content is vocabulary.

Vocabulary is an essential aspect of the English curriculum. We expect students to learn and understand vocabulary in the texts we choose. We require them to use metalanguage to analyse and evaluate texts. We also encourage them to apply and synthesise a varied lexicon into their own work to sophisticate their communication. These are higher order thinking activities, yet the memorisation rote learning relies on recall, the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills, neglecting all the principles of collaborative, digital and active learning honoured throughout recent policy and research.

Rote learning assumes that if students mentally 'swallow' the same word enough times, they will regurgitate it in the right places in their essays, analyses and speech. The process is relatively mindless for those with a good memory and plain inaccessible for anybody else. As many of us know from our own schooling, rote learning is boring. Drilling words into our minds through repetition leaves a gaping hole in positive learning experiences along the way.

I faced the 'vocabulary and metalanguage' problem early in my first year of teaching with a persuasive language analysis unit. To succeed in this unit, students needed to understand a two-page table of metalanguage on persuasive techniques. I was neither confident nor happy asking my students to revise the list and regurgitate it throughout their essays. Rote learning had to go, and this is what I suggest in its place:

MATCH AND FIND

Each student pulls a card with a metalanguage term or definition from an envelope. They then have to silently find the student with the word or definition that matched theirs. They then work together to find examples in real articles, create a number of examples of their technique and discuss the intended effect of the technique on readers. Each pair then reports to the class.

COLLABORATIVE METALANGUAGE WORD BANK

Using Google Sheets, the search engine's freely available, online version of Excel, spreadsheets can be created and shared amongst the whole class within seconds.

Labelling different columns with 'language technique', 'definition', 'example', 'author's intention' and 'impact', for example, a number of terms from the earlier mentioned metalanguage tables in the first column. students are assigned specific categories of the table to fill in.

The activity encourages students to work together to create an understanding of persuasive technique metalanguage and its purpose. In attaching their own examples to one another's definitions of words, students are more actively involved in the vocabulary learning than if they had been simply memorising words off a list. By inviting students to edit with their email addresses, the teacher can see who makes contributions and monitor learning. The Google Sheet remains online permanently so the teacher and students can view and update as they see fit.

REVERSE ARTICULATE

This activity adopts the format of the board game *Articulate!* to help students develop deeper and demonstrate a deeper understanding of the metalanguage vocabulary. It generates engagement through competition and it is also a lot of fun!

The class is divided into two teams with one representative selected each round to face the class. Projecting the game screen (e.g. a PowerPoint presentation) behind the representative, the standing student's team has to help the

students guess the main term on the heading of the slide without saying the four related words below. The teacher can let the teams make up their own slides for subsequent games.

Time limits and additional rules such as no derivatives, sounds or actions can increase difficulty. This active learning game forces students to give examples for each term; think of synonyms and alternate ways to describe something and learn from one another.

CONCLUSION

The above activities are only a measly portion of teaching methods that avoid traditional rote vocabulary learning. Vocabulary is a hugely important part of our domain that requires higher order thinking skills for communications and analysis. As English teachers, we need to value it as such by facilitating creative, collaborative, active and fun learning methods for our students.

Grace Robertson

What if we made our own textbooks? Exploring the potential of the eBook and its impact on flipped learning

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As tablets become ubiquitous in school environments, the role of technology has become increasingly pertinent to student engagement. In the haste of schools adopting tablets, an abundance of applications have been introduced to the classroom, some of which prioritise style and 'fun' over substance and inevitably fail to make a positive impact on learning outcomes. Hence, it has taken faculties some time to test and develop ways of utilising these devices and their applications to enhance the delivery of existing content. From the humble beginnings of faculty-created eBooks came a simple, yet powerful idea to further engage students: combining technology with the traditional concept of the flipped classroom, scaffolding students and empowering them to devise their own unit plan for a topic in an eBook that is entirely created and owned by them.

Unit-focused eBooks can become a collaborative product between all members of the English faculty. Combining a selection of proven, effective and diverse resources, from worksheets and activities to video files and websites, eBooks permit the collation of the best materials sourced and created by all teachers across a given unit. Created using the user-friendly program, eBooks Author, eBooks can evolve over time from a primitive collection of resources to a structured and sequenced companion for students, utilising the power of interactive quizzes and embedded websites to enhance student engagement and understanding.

The adoption of eBook technology at Caulfield Grammar has resulted in a number of flow-on benefits; they have addressed difficulties in resource sharing, reduced costs associated with printed resources and ensured that content is sequenced in a way that allows scaffolding opportunities for lower-ability or absent students, whilst providing extension tasks for students with higher abilities. It should be noted that eBooks have not been used as an obstinate 'unit guide' and are flexible enough to allow teachers to tailor their use to a unit's progression, and their classes' abilities and learning styles.

The natural question follows: if each student and class learns differently, why not flip the process of eBook creation and empower students to take an active and collaborative role in the planning of a unit's resources? The concept of a flipped classroom has proven highly effective in engaging students in their own learning and, when applied to the creation of unit eBooks, teachers can realise the potential for highly relevant, class-specific resources that are ultimately more functional.

Practically speaking, the flipped creation of unit eBooks becomes a seven-staged process:

1. The skeleton of the unit and the main outcome tasks are clearly set out, then discussed with, and distributed to the class. Students are required to examine a topic or text in groups of three or four.

2. Using a scaffolded approach, a set of guided questions is presented for discussion to each student group. For example, for a text study with an extended response essay at the completion of the unit:

   → What are you interested in after reading this text?

   → What didn't you understand?

   → What do you need to know more about?

   → What do we need to think about when we look at a text?

   → What do you need to know when you talk about a text?

   → What skills do we need when writing an essay?

   → What is a logical order in which these elements should occur?

3. One student is nominated to facilitate a follow-up class discussion and act as scribe during a group brainstorm, whilst the teacher takes a 'back seat' role in the classroom to provide support only as required.

4. Once the essential information has been determined, students are asked, 'How would this look if it were presented in a book?' With this prompt to talk about the unit as a text, hence building and scaffolding their understanding, students are encouraged to form links between the various foci of the unit. It is at this stage that the various teacher-provided resources are laid out and selected by students, based on the various areas of study that they have already deemed important to the unit's learning outcomes.

5. Every student is allocated a page to create for the eBook, with the exception of one student who is tasked with the role of pulling the final eBook together at the end of the process.

6. Students are provided with a planner of all of the lessons that will occur in the unit and asked to record what they think each lesson should contain. This step will provide students the opportunity to structure and sequence the lesson orders and re-evaluate what resources should be used in class and what could be allocated to homework time.

7. Finally, a short allocation of time at the end of the unit allows students to reflect on how they felt they had planned the unit, determining strengths and opportunities for the way in which future units are planned.

The process is clearly dependent on a teacher's ability to guide student conversations, using prompting questions rather than providing answers about how a unit should run. End-to-end, the activity should ideally be allocated two fifty-minute lessons; whilst such a significant time allowance may be prohibitive for some of units of study, the time invested in creating an engaging and scaffolded unit companion is well justified for those that have capacity to allow it.

Combined with the concept of a 'flipped learning' teaching model, eBook creation allows the development of both Middle Years English and VCE English resource companions that are tailored to student needs. This concept helps create a more engaging, student driven classroom, assists students in developing cognitive processing abilities and gives unparalleled scaffolding opportunities for any given unit.

Author's note: Caulfield Grammar School uses iBooks, Apple's branded version of eBooks, but the general term has been used to avoid confusion.

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iBooks Author: https://www.apple.com/au/ibooks-author/

Alexander Goldsworthy

WHAT IF SHAKESPEARE WASN'T SACRED?

Interview with James Evans, Bell Shakespeare

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BELL SHAKESPEARE.

James Evans directs specially produced Bell Shakespeare productions for students.

Idiom: Is it odd that we are still studying so much Shakespeare centuries after his time when so many new plays have been written? Where are the contemporary plays?

Evans: Contemporary plays and Shakespeare work in tandem. I don't think you can abandon one in favour of the other. We need contemporary dramatists to continue to grapple with the great questions of modern life. We also need Shakespeare to show us a universal and timeless image of what it is to be human.

Idiom: What would a syllabus without Shakespeare be like?

Evans: It would be greatly reduced! Students would miss a big plank of material that allows them to think critically about the world around them. His plays open a world to students that they might not otherwise have access to.

Students can see themselves in Shakespeare's plays. This allows them to be active thinkers rather than passive consumers.

Idiom: Why are Shakespeare's works seemingly 'timeless'?

Evans: He doesn't judge his characters, relationships or situations. There is no moral didacticism. His plays are so open. They are more about asking questions rather than telling us how it is. This allows for fresh interpretation.

Idiom: What would you say to someone who says Shakespeare's language is too difficult and irrelevant for kids today?

Evans: We need to engage students with complex language.

We need to challenge them, and allow them to rise to that challenge.

There is a richness of expression in Shakespeare's language that encourages kids to express themselves in a different way to modern English.

People talk about the right age to introduce kids to Shakespeare. I think it should be introduced in schools in Years 4, 5 or even earlier.

My child was in Year 1 when I first did a Shakespeare workshop with his class. They loved the language, the rhythm, and the sounds those words make.

If we can introduce the language at a young age and show them it's fun and joyful, it won't seem so inaccessible later on.

Idiom: What is your role at Bell Shakespeare?

Evans: I act as a creative supervisor of our Learning programmes, making sure that education fits in with the artistic vision of the company. It's my job to ensure young audiences get the best quality shows: the same as a main stage audience.

Idiom: What is the creative process for a Bell Shakespeare production?

Evans: Each director approaches things in a different way. Some directors don't like to impose a particular time or place on their productions. They will focus on words and language, taking an abstract view of the world of the play.

Others like to say more specifically, 'This is set in the 1890s' for example, which brings a different richness to the play, setting and context.

Bell Shakespeare embraces these different approaches.

Idiom: Do you find students react more positively to productions with costumes, sets and props more than a stripped back style?

Evans: They respond well to both kinds. We can do *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with four actors in jeans, black tee shirts and a few accessories. This allows kids to interpret it for themselves.

We also do the main stage with full lighting, costumes and sets. We encourage kids to get all sorts of experiences and interpret Shakespeare in many different ways.

Shakespeare is not some sacred text. In our masterclasses, we encourage students to interpret a scene or character through their own lens.

Idiom: Do you have a culture of thinking or some key questions that you ask when you are about to stage a new interpretation of a well-known story?

Evans: We tend to ask 'Who are these people?' and 'Where are we?'

It is up to each production to answer that, and I think this is also relevant to education.

Teachers first need to get across, in an exciting and engaging way, the broad spectrum of the play to be studied.

Who are these different sets of characters? Where are they? What are the rules of this society? Why are the rules of this society causing problems?

For *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for example this might encompass Athens and the enchanted forest, looking at the different worlds of the play first, then the story, then the language.

Idiom: What would be your advice then for someone who is about to teach a Shakespeare text for the first, or fiftieth time?

Evans: Sitting around reading the whole play is the perfect way to kill the play and make sure kids will hate it.

I wouldn't read the whole play with a class, ever.

Instead, get the students up and active, performing selected scenes.

The teacher can act as a facilitator, getting kids up on their feet and going through a synopsis of the play first. Discussion will naturally grow out of that. Having a physical experience of the play is far better than being confronted with a wall of words.

Focus on a few, key, action fuelled scenes and put these in the context of the whole play.

By going from the context to the story and then to small, manageable sections of text, you can make sure kids are enjoying studying the play.

Idiom: How would you integrate film versions of Shakespeare's plays or the *ShakespeaRe-Told* television series, which uses modern language?

Evans: These can run adjacent to the teaching of Shakespeare but I wouldn't show these upfront.

I think it is best to start with the students' own interpretation before others get in.

Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* is excellent, but if students can only interpret Romeo and Juliet's first meeting as the 'fish tank' scene because that is what they saw first, an opportunity has been missed.

It may be best to watch film versions at the end of a unit.

Idiom: You are about to reinvent *Romeo and Juliet* for Melbourne and Sydney audiences. What are some of the most interesting retellings you have come across for Shakespeare's oeuvre?

Evans: Bell Shakespeare did an amazing 'Scottish play' recently. Instead of three witches there was one woman with three different voices, put through an electronic filter. It was like the witches were voices in her head. Very creepy!

For our *Julius Caesar*, Cassius was made into a female role. This created a new set of variables with Brutus and Cassius competing with Caesar for their own advantage.

Idiom: As someone who works with the professional performance of Shakespeare's plays, and students, every day, do you have any other comments or advice for teachers of English?

Evans: I don't think you can harm or damage Shakespeare.

Be robust. Chop it, change it. The characters and plays will always 'bounce back' and be ready for another interpretation and another generation.

King Lear was edited 75 years after Shakespeare's death to have a happy ending and it was performed that way for over 150 years before it reverted to the original version.

I would just encourage teachers to reimagine it. It is the way we learn more about ourselves.

James Evans

What if English wasn't compulsory?
The Problems with Compulsory Year 12 English

Kristian Radford, Copperfield College

To receive a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and to meet entry requirements at universities in Victoria, students must study an English subject at Year 12 (English, English as an Additional Language, Literature, or English Language). However, this is not the case for some other equivalent Australian senior secondary certificates or institutions (South Australia or Tasmania, for example). In contemporary Australia, individuals undoubtedly need to be competent users of the English language, but it does not necessarily follow that completing English as a Year 12 subject will ensure this, or even make it more likely. Therefore, it must be asked: is the Victorian requirement necessary, fair, or even beneficial for all students?

Specific content knowledge in English

It is possible that a compulsory subject requirement at Year 12 is intended to ensure a certain set of shared knowledge or skills for all Victorian secondary school graduates. However, even after setting aside the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), which has its own compulsory literacy requirements, it can be seen that the English requirement in VCE does not follow this rationale. Compare, for example, the Study Designs of Literature and English Language and it is clear that there is very little in common between these two subjects beyond reading and writing in the same language.

Perhaps it is disingenuous to use English Language as an example, seeing as in Units 3 and 4 at least, it is largely a course in sociolinguistics, and not really comparable to the other VCE English subjects. In fact, that students can study English Language to meet the English requirement is an interesting compromise, especially considering the uniqueness of that subject among Australian state and territory curriculums. But suppose, for argument's sake, we further narrow our focus to the other three VCE English subjects, namely English, English as an Additional Language (EAL), and Literature. One fundamental similarity between these subjects is the study of literary texts, such as novels, plays, films, or poems. Jay Thompson (2006) has pointed out that English as a discipline 'has traditionally focused ... primarily upon *literary* texts' (p. 57, emphasis in original), and gives three reasons why this should continue to be so. Thompson's first two reasons—that literary texts help to teach fundamental skills such as grammar, and that reading helps students to understand better how language works— do not really hold up now that English Language, a subject where these topics are taught effectively, both explicitly and in different contexts, is a viable option (see Mulder and Thomas, 2009). Thompson's third reason is that fiction (and presumably other literary genres) exposes students to different points of view. I do not dispute this, nor do I dispute the value of such exposure. If this remains the most significant benefit unique to studying English, then a compelling case needs to be made as to why this exposure is so integral to a young adult's secondary education that it cannot be put aside until after Year 12 (instead of Year 11). (If one were instead to argue that English Language, the subject in which students are explicitly taught about how language works, should be compulsory, then a different and possibly quite powerful case could be made.)

The importance of general literacy skills

If the specific content taught in Year 12 English subjects is not a strong enough reason for making it compulsory, perhaps the acquisition of general literacy skills like reading and writing make the requirement worthwhile. In English, EAL, and Literature, students read at least three literary texts (in English and EAL, at least three out of four selected texts must be written; in Literature, students are likely to read many more than three). In English Language, students are unlikely to read literary texts in full, although they may read and analyse short passages from texts of various genres. Furthermore, it is certainly the case that all four subjects require students to write, and to write copiously. This demonstrates that the Year 12 English requirement ensures that students continue to exercise their reading and writing skills in their final year of schooling. Is this the only means by which Year 12 students' literacy is developed?

When I asked my Year 11 English Language class whether they agreed with the VCE requirement of doing an English subject in Year 12, opinion was divided. Those who were in favour pointed out that using English well is a necessity in contemporary Australia, a viewpoint which undoubtedly we all share. But looking at other Year 12 subjects, it becomes clear that the English subjects are not the only ones in which students need to read and write. This is obviously the case

in Humanities subjects like History and Philosophy, but if an English teacher were to look at a VCE Biology exam, he or she might be surprised to discover just how much reading and writing is required (in 2014, the exact amount was 41 pages). Furthermore, this reading and writing is far from trivial, requiring knowledge of and competency in using an extensive, specialised vocabulary. Biology is no anomaly; a similar pattern can be seen across the range of VCE subjects, from Business Management to Physical Education, especially considering that all have a written examination that accounts for a substantial proportion of the assessment, even those that one may expect to focus more on the practical application of skills, such as Studio Arts or Software Development. It is pointed out in the Australian Curriculum that, '[W]hile much of the explicit teaching of literacy occurs in the English learning area, it is strengthened, made specific and extended in other learning areas as students engage in a range of learning activities with significant literacy demands' (ACARA, 2013, p. 1). Reading and writing, then, are clearly not taught and assessed in English subjects alone, and students develop their general literacy skills in Year 12 subjects other than English. In other words, the compulsory study of English is not the only way that Year 12 students develop literacy.

The equity of the English requirement

Even if students can learn to read and write in other contexts, is there any harm in requiring them to study English and read a few books that they might not have otherwise read? After all, they are of course free to choose the rest of their subjects. While the Year 12 English requirement might not be harmful in and of itself, one major issue that arises is the calculation of a student's Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR). The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) mandates that at least one English subject be included in a student's first four subjects, which count for the significant majority of the ATAR (if a student studies more than four subjects, only 10% of their scores in the fifth and sixth subjects contribute to the ATAR, compared to 100% each for the first four). This is potentially problematic because of the way reading and writing skills are so deeply embedded in the assessment of all VCE subjects.

In general terms, a student with poor reading and writing ability is almost certainly destined for a low Study Score in any English subject. This is, of course, the nature of the competitive ranking system of Study Scores and ATARs, where student achievement is judged relative to other students, instead of against fixed standards. However, because VCE assessment is so heavily dependent on literacy, a student with lower than average reading and writing abilities will also be hindered to an extent in every subject area. In effect, the compulsory English requirement causes these students, who might not otherwise want to study a Year 12 English subject, to be punished in their

ATAR for something that is already reflected in the difficulties they must try to overcome in every other subject. The Year 12 English requirement disproportionately affects these students, and is therefore inequitable.

English is, and should be, a core aspect of the Victorian high school curriculum. But it is also the only subject compulsory in Year 12, and whether it should be afforded this status is questionable. There seems to be little consensus about exactly what students need to learn by studying one of the Year 12 English subjects. For example, Literature and English Language both meet the compulsory requirement, even though the content of these subjects barely overlaps and they are effectively concerned with two different disciplines (literary studies and linguistics, respectively). This suggests that the English requirement is not in place to ensure that students learn a particular set of knowledge. Furthermore, the reading and writing skills that students develop in English subjects are already significant aspects of all other VCE subjects, particularly due to the nature of VCE assessment and examinations. The literacy demands of all Year 12 subjects mean that students who have poor reading and writing abilities are disproportionately affected by the English requirement. While developing students' literacy skills is important, rather than forcing students to study a subject called English, it might be more beneficial, and fair, to allow students the freedom to choose another subject that engages them and allows them to strengthen and extend their literacy skills in a context of their choosing.

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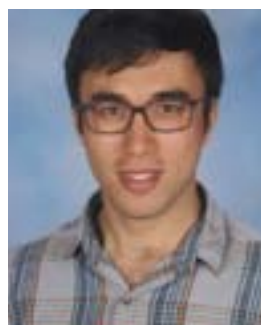
Kristian Radford

What if I'm not good enough?
write.fail.teach.repeat: A Play

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A room, empty, except for a blackboard.

CHRIS and A STUDENT enter.

STUDENT: That's not fair.

CHRIS: I think I made my expectations clear.

STUDENT: You said I could write a story.

CHRIS: Yes.

STUDENT: And I wrote a story, didn't I?

CHRIS: You wrote your own narrative.

STUDENT: You failed me.

CHRIS: I gave you an assessment criteria, which explained, in detail –

STUDENT: You were my *favourite* – like – I actually thought we were friends.

CHRIS: I'm your –

STUDENT: You said you liked my writing.

CHRIS: I do.

STUDENT: You said I have a voice. That I've got – what? – *fire*.

CHRIS: Flair.

STUDENT: So then why did you fail me, huh?

CHRIS: Because you wrote *your own* narrative.

STUDENT: You said I could!

CHRIS: You didn't address the assessment criteria, or answer the question in your response.

STUDENT: Yes I did.

CHRIS: You didn't make any reference to *Cloudstreet*, or any –

STUDENT: Because it's *my* writing, *my* world, not Tim dickhead Winton's.

CHRIS: I understand that's what you –

STUDENT: Do you?

CHRIS: But that wasn't the task. That wasn't the task that you were asked to –

STUDENT: Fuck the task! The task doesn't matter. You failed my fucking writing!

Silence.

CHRIS: Would you like to have your work marked by another teacher?

Silence.

CHRIS: Because I think, in fact, given the circumstances, the mark that I gave you was generous.

STUDENT: Why are you even here?

CHRIS: I thought I should discuss this with you, privately.

STUDENT: That's not what I mean. I mean, teaching English. Here. If you're some big shot playwright, some *real* success, how come you ended up here, failing me?

CHRIS: Look, I –

STUDENT: Give me my story back.

Pause.

STUDENT: Give it back.

Pause.

CHRIS tentatively gives the assessment back to the STUDENT.

The STUDENT holds it up to CHRIS, about to rip it.

Then, the STUDENT slowly folds it and puts it away.

STUDENT: You're the failure.

STUDENT walks off.

CHRIS: In that moment, I ask myself: *did I fail to explain the assessment task clearly?*

Did I build their confidence up as a writer, and then tear it to shreds?

Did I forge a relationship as a friend, instead of an effective teacher, which I then compromised?

This hasn't happened yet, but it might.

CHRIS goes to the blackboard, and writes: 'ONE YEAR EARLIER'.

MUM and DAD enter.

MUM: I think you'd make an excellent teacher.

CHRIS: Thanks, Mum.

DAD: I think you're a bloody idiot.

CHRIS: Thanks, Dad.

DAD: You spent all this time doing a Law degree, going through all the rigmarole of your placement, working at your community legal centre and for what? You're going to become a *teacher*. Like your old bloody man!

CHRIS: Being a lawyer doesn't interest me. It's not active, it's not –

MUM: He doesn't like it. He can't be creative.

CHRIS: It's a boring desk job.

DAD: You think the kids will let you be creative? They'll tire you out and bore you shitless. It's a shit of a profession, haven't you learnt that?

CHRIS: I'd be a different teacher to you, Dad.

DAD: Well, you better bloody be.

MUM: What would you teach? English? Drama?

CHRIS: And Legal Studies, too.

MUM: You do realise teaching is a *lot* of work, Chris.

CHRIS: What, with all those holidays?

MUM: It's not the sort of profession you can be half-hearted about.

CHRIS: I wouldn't be half-hearted. I'd care.

DAD: We all cared for about a term.

MUM: Don't listen to him.

DAD: I cared for about eight and a half weeks and the next thirty-seven years were completely pointless.

MUM: Teachers can and *do* make a difference, Chris.

DAD: Says the woman who's worked at the same, top-ranked school for the last twenty. Are you *really* making a difference, Irene, if your student goes from 99.90 to 99.95?

CHRIS: I'll work in a school that really needs me, and I'll contribute to a community. It's got a real social conscience, and I'm part of a bigger picture change.

DAD: Sounds like you're trying to convince yourself.

CHRIS: I owe it to myself to try this.

DAD: To try *something else* – again? You're twenty-bloody-*six,* you owe it to yourself to stick with something already.

CHRIS: And while I'm teaching, I can – write – on the side.

DAD: Christ, we're not still going on about that are we?

Silence.

DAD: You've done your plays, isn't it time you grew up?

MUM: Alex...

DAD: He knows it's not going to happen.

MUM: Back off, Alex.

DAD: You know that, don't you Chris? You are never going to make a living as a writer. There. Said. Done.

Silence.

DAD: Nothing worse than a bitter teacher who'd rather be doing something else. Am I right, Irene? Hey? How's that for irony?

Silence.

DAD: So you're going to be a teacher. Good luck to you, Mr G.

MUM: I think you'd make an excellent teacher, Chris.

DAD: And I think you're a bloody idiot.

MUM and DAD stop, frozen.

CHRIS: I wonder if they're disappointed in me – if they think I'm taking the easy option, or the option that still clings to some misguided concept of myself as a 'writer'.

I wonder, even if my Dad thinks I'm doing the wrong thing, does he think that maybe I could still make a good teacher?

CHRIS rubs out the blackboard, and writes: 'HOPES', and below it, 'FEARS'.

After each hope or fear, CHRIS draws a tally stroke on the board.

CHRIS: **HOPE:** That I can effectively manage classroom behaviour through creating structure, meaningful and challenging tasks, and an appropriately stern voice.

FEAR: That I am pigeonholed as 'the Drama guy', because there is so much more to me than that.

HOPE: That students respect me as someone who will push them beyond what they anticipate they are capable of, thereby surprising themselves.

FEAR: That my Dad doesn't take me seriously.

FEAR: That I don't take me seriously.

FEAR: That I'm so caught up in whether I'm being taken seriously, I forget to actually focus on the students, and not only myself.

HOPE: That inspiring students to express themselves creatively, I can feel energised in my own creativity, and write.

HOPE: That I can relay life experience to encourage students to see education as existing beyond scores and numbers, and lasting a lifetime.

FEAR: That I'm doing this for the wrong reasons, to avoid the nagging voice in my head that tells me I am a failure.

FEAR: That I patronise my students, or irritate them, or can't find a way to meaningfully connect beyond the teacher who 'teaches' and student who 'learns'.

FEAR: That I try too hard.

FEAR: That I exhaust myself in the process.

HOPE: That I give just enough of my self away, and keep enough separate, to preserve some distance.

HOPE: That students look forward to my classes.

HOPE: That every student feels like they are receiving the attention they need in my classes; not just the ones who I know I am predisposed to be focused on.

FEAR: That I'm a bad teacher.

FEAR: That I'm a well-intentioned but ineffective teacher.

FEAR: That I'm wasting the formative teenage years of students; experimenting with them; toying with their abilities and exploiting their weaknesses; that I'm stripping them of a meaningful education in years that they will never get back.

CHRIS looks at the tally strokes, and counts them.

CHRIS: Seven hopes.

Eleven fears.

Eighteen.

Pause.

I am not the success that I thought I was going to be at eighteen.

But does that mean I cannot be an excellent teacher, free of the trappings of that word: *failure*?

Maybe we all fail.

A lot.

Every day.

But maybe, we don't let it define who we are.

We pick up the pieces and ask ourselves: *what's next?*

CHRIS rubs out the blackboard, and writes: 'ONE YEAR FROM NOW'.

CHRIS: This hasn't happened yet, but it might.

STUDENT enters.

STUDENT: I didn't mean to swear.

CHRIS: That wasn't appropriate.

STUDENT: I just – I thought you got me. You know? I'm sensitive about my writing. My parents are *so* – no one else but you thinks I've got any talent or anything.

Pause.

STUDENT: Can I re-sit the assessment?

CHRIS: I'll discuss it with the Lead Teacher.

STUDENT: I'll write about Tim Winton this time. And all those literary techniques. And the intentions. I swear, I will. It'll be the best, most boring analytical essay ever.

Pause.

STUDENT: I'm sorry, sir.

CHRIS: I'd like to tell you something.

I'm here, at this school, because I want to be.

I *chose* to be.

STUDENT nods.

CHRIS: And we'll take it from there.

STUDENT leaves.

CHRIS rubs out the board, and writes: 'ONE YEAR AND COUNTING'.

DAD appears.

DAD: Let me put a question to you. Why do you really *want* to be an English teacher?

Pause.

CHRIS: Because I believe I can positively affect the lives of students.

Because I believe in an English education providing a framework for better engaging with, and critiquing, the world.

Because I believe I can deliver challenging and rewarding curriculum with an eye towards contemporary pedagogy.

Because I believe there is no greater gift, no more wonderful skill, than creative self-expression.

Because I believe – I *know* – I am doing it for the right reasons.

DAD smiles, then disappears.

CHRIS wipes the blackboard, and exits.

Chris Summers

WHAT IF WE WEREN'T RUSHED?

Jacinta Werner, Catholic College, Sale

What would we do if we had time in our classrooms; if we had no limitations; if we didn't have the structure of the present curriculum? Imagine an English curriculum that wasn't rushed, where we as teachers had the choice to spend endless hours having fun with language!

I am teaching a new subject this year called the 'Inclusive Learning Program.' This is a program that addresses academic gaps from Years 7 to 9, where we focus on literacy, numeracy, employability and information skills. We teach the class as a whole, but also focus on the student's individual areas that need improvement. In thinking about the Year 7 students in my care and the struggles that a lot of them have with literacy, specifically reading, comprehension, spelling and being engaged in language, I have been starting to formulate a plan for Term 2, which centres around 'losing the paradigm.' In teaching this subject, I am very aware that its death knell would sound very quickly if it became another English or Maths, so I have to be very creative and take my students on an adventure; they should look forward to Inclusive Learning and others should want to join. At the same time though, students need to learn and their academic gap needs to be 'filled.'

I remember many years ago, listening to the author, Michael Hyde, speak at a conference about a group of students that he taught with very low literacy skills. He sparked their interest in language by transforming part of the classroom into a tent-like area where they would read and discuss books. I'm sure many of us have done a similar thing, but the idea of giving students a space and the time to immerse themselves in language is appealing.

In the coming term, I would like to create some time for my Year 7 students to allow them to have fun with language, to discuss language, to question it and to create it. This 'time' would allow them to go off on a tangent if they wanted to, instead of being pulled back to follow and keep up with the curriculum. Having a unique space that is comfortable would allow students to physically and mentally relax into the exploration of language. We would tap into the enthusiasm and passion of people like Stephen Fry, Tim Minchin and Libby Gorr. I envisage discovery, challenge, peer support and feisty discussion, without pressure or fear of failure and together we would learn how to read, spell, comprehend and use the word 'paradigm.'

Jacinta Werner

WHAT IF ENGLISH WAS TAUGHT LIKE SOMETHING ELSE?

Interview with Lucie Bradley, Co-founder Laneway Learning
@lanewaylearning   http://www.lanewaylearning.com/

Laneway Learning is a series of evening classes that first started in Melbourne in 2012 and has since spread to other cities. Their classes are one-off, informal workshops taught by people from the local community. Hosted in various bars and community spaces, they are social gatherings that offer a very diverse range of content.

Idiom: What is Laneway Learning?

Bradley: A social enterprise that hosts informal evening classes in anything and everything.

The core concept is that learning should be fun and accessible to everybody – both in terms of price and knowledge/skills – and that community is really important.

For the teachers, Laneway Learning classes offer a platform for people from the community, whether they are professional educators or have never taught before, to share their passion.

For the students, classes provide the chance to learn something new in a fun, social setting.

Idiom: Is there a typical format of class?

Bradley: Class topics are so varied that there is a variety of teaching styles and techniques. These include using a presentation or projector to show images, video clips or to highlight key points or inquiry questions; working through an example in real time using a white board; getting volunteers from the audience to participate in a demonstration or answer a question; passing relevant objects around; group discussion – in pairs, small groups, or the whole class. Interaction is very important.

The class environment is informal and relaxed. Classes are held in cafes, bars, bookstores and other unused spaces around the city.

Taking learning out of the normal environment makes it feel more like a fun, social outing. Gone are the whitewashed walls, bright lights and plastic tables. Depending on the location, students can order a coffee, some food (or even a beer!). This makes the environment more relaxed and stops hunger pangs from distracting from the class.

Idiom: Is there a common personality trait of students?

Bradley: Students are curious individuals who want to learn more about the world around them, or pick up a new hobby. They are always very friendly!

Many come with a friend or two but many more come alone and make new friends. Class sizes are capped at a maximum of 24 to foster a friendly, 'no question too stupid' vibe.

Everyone has at least one thing in common – an interest in that class topic!

Idiom: What sort of things can people learn?

Bradley: The majority of classes teach knowledge or a skill, but these categories are broad.

Knowledge might be something scientific such as what the Higgs Boson is. It might be the basics of a foreign language. It could also be related to food, for example knowledge of the wine making process, how to taste wine and understanding what the different tastes are.

Skills are often a craft of some sort, like making lampshades, or it could be something like basic bicycle maintenance. Classes often combine knowledge and skills.

Students can also learn behaviours and philosophies. Again these are often paired with knowledge or skills, such as meditation or the art of productivity. We have everything from energetic dance (the Michael Jackson *Thriller* routine), to something else entirely like an introduction to meditation.

Idiom: Which classes are most popular?

Bradley: Hands-on classes and those with obvious real-world benefits are usually the most popular. It is extremely gratifying to leave a class knowing what you have achieved and with something tangible to show for it.

Classes, such as making terrariums – where students leave with a completed terrarium – are a sure winner. Alternatively, something like hair braiding gives students a skill they can use every day.

Finally, classes that are simply for fun, such as chocolate tasting or ukulele playing, are a hit.

Idiom: How much do you think students retain from a lesson? Have some teaching techniques been more effective at ingraining knowledge?

Bradley: Knowledge retention depends on the extent to which the student is engaged with the topic and if the teaching style suits the student's learning style.

For skills, such as a dance routine or craft like knitting, effective classes have usually worked through repetition, and showing the same thing through several teaching styles.

The teacher might first show the students what needs to happen, then show the students at a slow speed whilst verbally explaining what is being done, then lead the students through slowly, finally getting the students to practise whilst moving through the class offering tips as required.

Effective knowledge-based classes can also draw on repetition and varied teaching styles. Teachers, for this type of class, might first talk through a concept, ensuring that they explain the same point from two different points of view, e.g. mathematically and then visually, then show a video or demonstration that further explains and grounds the knowledge, and finish up with a couple of questions or a short discussion to drive the point home.

Teaching complex or 'dry' ideas through the use of surprising media also helps. For example: the Higgs Boson was explained as 'helping to "create" mass by attracting particles to it, thus increasing. This is like Margaret Thatcher walking into a Conservative Party convention in 1990.'

Many teachers provide further resources so that interested students can follow up on the ideas after the class, further ingraining the knowledge or skills that they acquired.

Idiom: As co-founder, you have attended two to four classes a week since its creation three years ago. What have been the most memorable classes?

Bradley: We had a class called 'Kitchen Cosmology' which was about the history of the universe. However, the teacher taught this class by linking key ideas to dessert! We started with the Big Bang, which was demonstrated through popcorn before and after going into the microwave. Raisin pudding was used as an analogy for the expanding universe and so on. Linking astrology to food was such a fantastic way to teach the class because it was so unusual. Everyone was amazingly engaged and the visual aids really helped to make the content accessible.

The learning space in a 'Poker 101' class was transformed into a mini casino! Small tables were set up where groups of five or six could sit in a group and learn how to play but doing it.

As well as being a suitable arrangement for learning that particular content, by making the learning space fit the theme, the class was more memorable, fun and people were immediately in the right mindset.

The most memorable opening to a class was 'Creative Expression', which focussed on judgement-free creativity using different media.

The teacher prepared little 'welcome' packs containing a few differently coloured balls of modelling clay and a sign, designed to spark people's creativity and get people in the right mindset for the class.

It contained a call to action – making a sculpture that represented you – that had no right or wrong answer and was a lot of fun! People loved it.

Idiom: Have there been any difficult classes?

Bradley: Practical skills can be quite tricky to teach because often people will progress at very different rates, and, if people are finding it hard, they often need some one-on-one time in order to get the hang of it. Therefore, it can be hard to keep all students happy and engaged at all times.

In a knitting class, there were a couple of people who got the hang of it fairly quickly. They then were happy to explain the process in their own words, giving students another way of thinking about the process, which resonated more strongly with them. It was so nice and really helped the class to move forward as a whole.

Many of the classes have a small handout which includes some key information and further resources so that interested students can continue learning. For food classes, the handout would contain recipes and for crafts, it would show step-by-step instructions.

All craft classes leave students with the items that they have been making, which acts as a great learning product. In an 'Upcycled Origami' class, students took waste paper and turned it into gift boxes. This was a great product because it prompted students to go away and make more boxes of various sizes to use in their lives.

Idiom: The most memorable teachers?

Bradley: A father-daughter team teach chocolate making. They have a fantastic dynamic and the banter between them is brilliant to be a part of because they are so passionate and enthusiastic about chocolate and about sharing their knowledge with others – it is so infectious.

For the purpose of effective teaching, I think the teacher's interest in the subject and in teaching the subject is the most important factor.

Idiom: What class has had the most memorable conclusion?

Bradley: The 'Art of Productivity' offered many different ideas for increasing one's productivity and how to use those ideas to achieve goals.

The class ended with a call to action – which idea or ideas was each student going to implement and how were they going to do that?

I have definitely incorporated some of the ideas into my life!

Lucie Bradley

What if it were okay to fail?

Donna Prince, Candlebark School

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Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm (Winston Churchill).

I am often mistaken for a first year teacher. I think it's either because of my enthusiasm, or I seem like I'm still learning. I have been told 'not to worry, you'll get jaded soon enough'.

I will have been teaching for eleven years this year.

Should I not still be enthusiastic about my profession after a decade? Get stuffed! Get out of the profession if that's your attitude. I'd like to think that I'll still be this keen in another thirty years.

I have found myself happily in a school with other teachers who are like me, enthusiastic, bubbly and engaged. There are about twenty of us who get to work on the most amazing property with all of its bushland and wildlife and a pretty awesome bunch of kids. I'm pretty lucky. I work in an adventurous workplace that encourages crazy ideas. Which I am full of! Lots of them work, and loads of them don't. My mum always said 'you don't know if you don't try' so I try to try everything. The craziest thing I have done is taken fifteen Year 9 students into town for the first *White Night*. It was the most amazing night and not a little nerve wracking for me! We didn't lose anyone and we all had a great time. We slept long and hard the next day. This was a success. I want to talk about failure: specifically, about my failures as a teacher this year.

One of my failures came when I chose the wrong text for my Year 9 class. I have the beautiful freedom of choosing my own texts and the luxury of not having to take the texts off any kind of approved 'list'. I chose a text that I have successfully used with other classes; it deals with themes of virtual reality, consciousness, our definition of what constitutes life and our perception of reality and our visions of the future. Real 'meaning of life' stuff: stuff that we can sink our teeth into and have great classroom discussions on. The text is *Red Dwarf*. It's a funny, easy to read text that should lead the way to some fantastic classroom interactions and conversations. It went down like the proverbial lead balloon. So it comes down to me to make the choice.

Do we keep going? Keep persevering and slogging our way through a text that is obviously not grabbing these kids? Yes and no. In the end we completed the work up until the first assessment piece then we switched texts. I was really honest. To be honest, it was on me. I had read the class wrong in the beginning. My usual modus operandi with new classes is to take a lesson to talk with them, about them. It's a good way to feel out what they're into, what they will respond to and how well they will work given different topics. I had skipped this crucial intelligence gathering phase and paid the price in the form of lethargic students who found the text incomprehensible and consequently, gave me shoddy, ill-written work. So what did we learn? Well, the students persevered with the text long enough to finish and write an assessment piece. I am sure they will come across this exact situation later in life. They now know their capabilities to tough things out and ask for help when they need it. They also saw an adult listen to them and respond. Not in the way they wanted exactly (they wanted to drop the text right that second) but with a solution that satisfied both parties. I think it's also good for students to see an adult admit that they judged something incorrectly and that we are not perfect beings, as much as we try to be. I hope in this way I set them a good example.

So how does this relate to today's educational climate? I question how much trust is placed in our educators to fail responsibly? Ask yourself how many times in the past year have you had a crazy great idea that could increase student engagement and have been put off or given an excuse as to why you cannot try something new. Do you blithely follow the curriculum as it has been laid out with all the resources neatly in their folders or do you risk failure, attempting the sometimes impossible task of ripping enthusiasm into your students? If this is the case, the first thing I would advise you to do is deliberately fail a lesson, blow it off and talk to the kids about whatever the heck they're into, football, *Game of Thrones*, *Minecraft*, whatever! Digress the hell out of that session and see how they come at you after that. It just may change the way you relate to the students.

We get so worked up about failure. It's such a harsh word. It is the perfect word to strike fear into a student if you need to; it can be useful. Everybody has bad lessons. After eleven years, I still have planned lessons that I have to 'throw out'. Maybe it's windy outside that day. Maybe it's my tiredness that is giving me a bad lesson. It ultimately doesn't matter.

We ask students to try, knowing they may fail. How do we deal with that same situation? Do you cover up your mistakes? Ever spelt a word wrong on a board? Were you just 'testing' the students to see if they were paying attention? While I was looking up that famous Winston Churchill quote on failure, 'Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts', I found the one at the top of this article. Here it is again, 'Success is stumbling from failure to failure with no loss of enthusiasm'. I like it a lot better. I think it represents the way I operate more accurately, except that I hope I don't stumble. I want to flit, or pirouette or stalk my way through failure to failure with varied momentum, but no loss of enthusiasm.

That sounds much more exciting!

Donna Prince

WHAT IF WE REALLY USED LANGUAGE TO PERSUADE?
NO COMMENT: TEACHING MODERN RHETORIC

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Using Language to Persuade is a unit designed for students to analyse how authors position readers through their language devices. Traditionally, the texts under study are static, print-based opinion pieces written by journalists in newspapers. The shift to online publishing and social media opens up exciting and authentic ways for students to engage with persuasive language. What are the risks and rewards of going public with persuasive language?

Spot a rhetorical question, circle the inclusive language, throw in an 'appeal' to the hip-pocket-nerve - and you're home! Rinse and repeat, _ad nauseum_. Right?

Right! But we won't get away with it forever. _The Age_ of the broadsheet newspaper is over, and so is that lazy excuse of a unit. Grab that Using Language To Persuade book, yes, the resources folder, too. Is that article about public transport from 2002? Gross. Put it in the bin Doesn't matter, recycling is a hoax! Good. Where were we?

Oh that's right - engaging our students with some genuinely modern rhetoric. Not just historical source analysis. Now that we've thrown out all that horrible paper, let's jump online. Not only are all your favourite publishers still pumping out persuasive pieces, but you and your students can join the conversation. Get their hands dirty! Persuasive language is much more persuasive when you're participating. Is Mr Bolt ripping someone a new one? A prize to the first student who gets retweeted by him or his victim. Who can get the most 'likes' in the next 48 hours? Which member of the public makes the most persuasive reply, and why? Persuasive language is exciting when your whole class only has 140 characters; or you only have 20 minutes left to ask the teacher for advice on your zinger.

It seems exciting, but is anyone teaching like this? If not, why not? You might not be confident with all the fangly-dangly technology. Fair enough. NOT! Ladies and gentlemen, start your search-engines! 'How to [insert technical skill]' usually yields good results. Read some comment threads, get a Twitter account; whatever - just hurry up and figure it out. 'You snooze, you lose' when it comes to authentic opportunities to engage students with fresh pedagoogle.

If tech isn't the issue, perhaps you're scared? Change is risk. What if students get cyber-bullied on Twitter in class? What if they are cyber-bullies? What about the reputation of the school? Letting students loose on the whole internet with their opinions? You must be crazy!

Let's be honest, we are teaching a generation of keyboard warriors, they're already online doing these things so a lesson with us can't make things that much worse. Teachers are models and regulators of social behaviour - irrespective of what they teach. Yet there is no responsible adult in the room where they spend an increasing amount of their time, socially and educationally. If we want to teach digital citizenship, I'm afraid we're going to have to put on our cyberboots and wade on in. Will there be issues? Probably. Will you resolve them? Probably. Will they learn stuff? Almost certainly.

I jumped in the deep end recently. I gave my Year 10 class three articles that had been published that very day, or they could find their own as long as comments were still open. I had to approve their comment before they posted it. If they didn't want to post one, they could just send it to me.

It's funny – under my 'expert' eye as an English teacher, they hand in all sorts of unedited drivel, occasionally bothering to capitalise new sentences. Under the eye of public scrutiny, it was amazing how much editing went on. 'Read this!', 'What do you think? Is that too much?', 'What's a better word for this?' - check, edit, ask a friend, edit, laugh, delete, and so on. It was buzzing! Of course, there was a little immaturity, but if that's the price for excitement, I'll pay it. Here is one student, 'sassprincess', commenting on a pop culture revelation. A more political student, 'eyebrowssss', used her recent study of a scathing retort to policy reactions to the live-export ban. Both got 'recommendations' and 'replies' from members of the public who engaged with their opinion, and responded. If this isn't a genuine exercise of persuasive writing, I don't know what is.

This is far from a rigorous study, but it was an encouraging start. Look again at the badly photocopied article you are about to put under the nose of a young keyboard warrior. If you can, start afresh, and encourage your students to join the conversation.

You can join this conversation, too. @lars_oscar @VATE_English #vateidiom

Oscar Hedstrom

What if the booklist had to be new each year? 'Burn down the Louvre!' Some thoughts about text selection

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The selection of texts to be studied within the Australian Curriculum has long been a contentious topic; consider the potential benefits of an entirely new list.

A new list demands new learning for students and teachers alike. Students would have little to no prior works on their text to regurgitate in assessment, and would be forced to draw on writing concepts from works on other texts. Teachers would not be allowed to select a text for which they already have all the resources and lesson plans from previous years. Whilst it should not be embraced impulsively, its potential should not be disregarded.

Teaching is a time-poor profession, so choosing a text simply because all the resources and lessons from a previous year are available is bound to occur. It provides for repetitive teaching, which neglects and defies the constant need for adaptation and reform in learning and teaching. This disengages students and dampens the excitement of discussion and thinking that should be substance of an English classroom. Furthermore, existing texts on the list should not remain there solely for fear of their dismissal. The classics will still be the classics, and students can discover these without the compulsion of studying them in English.

The benefits of a new text list extend beyond the use of young adult fiction texts to inspire independent learning. The concept of an overhaul gives hope to all contemporary writers that their work might be found worthy of use in a prescribed English curriculum. It means that the VCAA would be forced to re-evaluate all available texts in context of their genre, era and relevance. There will be significantly less room for bias based on longevity as previously favoured texts will be excluded from consideration. Works by authors such as Terry Pratchett, an adult fiction writer who was knighted for services to literature, may be taught without having to contest with *Great Expectations* for that right. Graphic novels, a medium that is rapidly increasing in popularity and literary value, would no doubt earn their place on a new list. *Friends With Boys* could substitute *Looking For Alibrandi* and engage visual learners in the English discipline.

An overhaul is not a perfect solution. It would require an immense task of the VCAA text selection committee. A new list could not be not be selected quickly or carelessly as each text must be justified enough to withstand parental and professional critique. The staff responsible would be held accountable to society to a far greater extent than was initially the case. Whilst an authority is necessary to decide the educational value of texts, the inputs of students, teachers and the wider society are equally necessary to ensure that the texts are appropriate

in other ways. The increased focus on engaged learning would give rise to more substantial opposition to texts that are not relatable for students. The rising popularity, subject variety and depth offered by different modes of texts such as graphic novels would ensure a high demand for examples to exist on the text list. The new list would be a product of collaborative effort and current needs.

Furthermore, teachers would have to read and prepare for entirely new texts, with some teaching as many as six per term. This challenge would bring a whole new environment for learning. Teachers would be introduced to texts at the same time as students, allowing them to explore and make discoveries together. Indeed there would be some students who could potentially understand a text beyond their teacher's knowledge or understanding of it. This would not prevent the teacher from performing their task of providing education, only make it more interesting. By making it necessary for teachers to create fresh lessons, the opportunity to integrate contemporary technology and teaching methods would become significantly easier. As with the creation of the new list, it is easier to start anew and build in current ideas and knowledge, than to adjust an old system to incorporate them.

Change is never easy, but education is no longer based on the idea that knowledge of the classics will serve to make you intelligent (Ken Robinson, 2010). The very definition of what is considered to be an 'educational text' has changed, and this warrants an equal change in the selection process. A complete overhaul of the VCAA text list is not the only solution; it may not even be the best solution. But through its consideration, the need for change, and the significant degree of that change, is undeniably apparent.

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Jacob Lawrie

What if teachers adopted another profession's perspective?

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'Those who can, do; those who can't, teach'. Perhaps those who spout this idiom perceive teachers only as repositories of specific content knowledge. They do not see teachers are also academics, project managers, artists, motivational speakers, diplomats, missionaries, philanthropists, counsellors, coaches, consultants, negotiators, logistics managers and yes, on occasion, babysitters, drill sergeants and prison guards.

'Teaching is the profession that teaches all the other professions'. So what if teaching adopted the perspective of other professions? How might English be taught by other professions?

A **Scientist** engages in a systematic activity to acquire knowledge and understanding of various realms.

What if we treated every lesson as a learning experiment, trying different hypotheses for instruction, technique and process; using different 'control' students and tasks? Objective records of multiple independent variables might help us identify misconceptions and false assumptions in our own values and teaching.

A **Tourist Guide** takes a group to places millions of others have been before, yet creates a unique, authentic journey each time. The experience is almost entirely intangible, yet lifelong memories can be created. Some sentimental souvenirs can also act as indexical reminders of the experience.

What if each text set out as a journey; completed learning tasks attained a stamp in a passport; photos captured significant moments; and there was a reason students wanted to share their stories and experiences?

A **Repairman** is called to a very specific problem, identifies the cause, and replaces any faulty component of the system with a new part and leaves, problem solved.

What if rather than trying to solve all the spelling, grammar, structure and content issues in students' writing, we ran a series of specific repair skills workshops? Better still, what if we tasked each student in the class to be an expert repairman for a certain aspect of writing, and students consulted each other, sharing their expertise?

A **Drill Sergeant** uses repetition, authority, simple processes and high expectations to turn a heterogeneous group of recruits into a uniform, homogeneous team capable of executing the same core skills to the same precise standard. His slightly intimidating persona and challenging task band the recruits together to the point where they help and support each other.

What if we did not tolerate sloppiness in written expression, structure and content, refusing to advance topics, tasks or students until they had met the standard? What if we allowed students to help each other in the process of getting the whole cohort to the required standard?

A **Marketer** use a set of tools to inform, persuade, motivate, and change behaviour. The information they share can be perceived as uninteresting or unwanted, so creating awareness, interest and desire are required for action.

What if teachers used creativity, repetition, gimmicks, and novel stimuli to raise awareness, arouse interest, stimulate desire and elicit action from their target market?

(NB: It worked for 'Sesame Street'! They copied advertising for their segment style production, right down to episodes being "sponsored" by certain letters and numbers!)

A **Builder** works from a carefully designed plan. He digs a deep, strong foundation on which to incrementally make a complex construction in a carefully planned order.

What if prior to beginning any class task in the new year, we spent several lessons really getting to know our students through diagnostic tests, interviews, social scenarios and 'play'? Would the foundations be stronger for any subsequent tasks? Would it help prevent setting students up for failure?

A **Special Effects** team spend hundreds of hours of painstaking detail to produce what may only end up being a few seconds of screen time. If they do their job well, the audience won't even know they did it.

What if we found ways to shift the perception of teachers as the source of all knowledge and assistance to students? What if we created systems that allowed students to help

themselves and each other? How could we 'outsource' our roles in such a way that students feel they have done everything themselves, even if that isn't the case?

A **Project Manager** creates clear and attainable project objectives, and manages cost, time, scope, and quality.

What if we were organised enough to set up a term, semester or a year's worth of learning objectives and activities such that students, parents and other teachers could easily see the objective, progress and quality? What diagnostics, reports and information would be required? Where are the bottlenecks for processes? How can we smooth the learning process for teachers and students?

A **Comedian** uses engaging verbal and non-verbal language to tell interesting stories and talk about concepts relevant to the audience in a humourous way.

What if we worried less about what we are saying and doing in the classroom and concerned ourselves more with the connection with the audience? What if we drafted and revised our own monologues to make them as concise and engaging as a brilliant stand-up routine? What if we incorporated latecomers, surprise responses and heckles as smoothly as a comic?

A **Journalist** researches information from a variety of sources, then reports a story using the most crucial pieces of information.

What if we distilled the 'Who, what, when, where, why, how?' information of our lessons into the most concise way possible and published it in a variety of forms (print, digital, audio) for students to process? (NB Lesson instructions could be published as a blog post, which could then be tweeted, shared on Facebook, read aloud by the SoundGecko app etc.)

A **Minister** engages in welfare and service activities of communities; provides pastoral care; and encourages thoughts, values and behaviour in line with the culture of the congregation.

What if we found ways to create and nurture a peaceful, friendly and supportive community at every turn? What if we acknowledged wickedness but forgave readily, worshipped and spread the word of learning? What if part of each lesson was devoted to mindfulness and letting the message actually sink in?

A **Computer programmer** writes, tests, debugs, and maintains the detailed instructions that computers must follow to perform their functions. Programmers also conceive, design, and test logical structures for solving problems by computer.

What if we tried to remove emotion from our decision making and teaching for a moment, seeing students as inputs and processes? How could we best diagnose problems, misconceptions, redundant processes and errors? What tests might we design to quickly find these 'bugs'?

Engineers design materials, structures and systems while considering the limitations imposed by practicality, regulation, safety, and cost. Ingenuity is prized.

What if we continually sought easier, cheaper, cleverer, smarter ways to do the things we do as teachers? Passing out materials in a more efficient way can save a few minutes a lesson: hours a term. What labour intensive, low or no value adding activities can be refined or dropped? What value adding activities can be incorporated into another activity? Marking the roll by way of spelling test; quiet reading at the beginning of the lesson while the teacher prepares materials; having a code or legend for comments on written work; using a school wide resource for spelling, grammar and writing tips?

A **Physician** promotes, maintains and restores health through the study, diagnosis, and treatment of disease, injury and impairment. Tests are run to find a phenomenon behind observed symptoms.

What if we diagnosed learning patterns, devised tests to identify misconceptions in thinking and applied remedies? What if we prescribed certain exercises or activities to assist in an interventionist approach? What if we kept detailed records that helped track progress?

These are quick snap shots of how thinking differently might help our teaching; closer analysis of individual professions may yield further insights. The tasks we perform, the language we use and the role we adopt can conform us and restrict us if we let them. Asking 'What if?' forces us to think differently, to reinvent our teaching, and even ourselves.

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the Teaching of English