English at a Time of Change: Where Do We Go with Text?

Catherine Beavis, Deakin University

Those of us interested in curriculum need to evaluate what aspects … need endorsing and encouraging and deepening, and what aspects need resisting and deflecting off course. We also need to imagine into being the directions in which we want any [encouraging] to occur: directions which teach young people more self-sustaining, more community-sustaining and more world-sustaining ways to understand reality and to live in it. (Collins 2002, p. 49)

May 2005 is an interesting point at which to be thinking about issues facing English teaching, where we are and what we’re doing. This is a matter of not asking, yet again, what is English, at least, not in the ways we have become used to recently, but rather, of taking stock of where are we, what we value, what we are doing and how we go forward, at a time of upheaval and change. What is the place of English and curriculum within the context of the globalised, networked world in which we and our students live? Exploring such questions means attending to the consequences and implications of what is often referred to as the knowledge economy or knowledge society and thinking about the kinds of community and futures this society seems to be leading to. What sorts of curriculum can best prepare young people to live creative, productive and socially just and engaged lives in what looks to be an increasingly fragmented and problematic society?

There have been a number of occasions recently that have converged to give a particularly sharp focus to questions of what is central to English and how we re-imagine ourselves in the twenty-first century. They were questions that preoccupied many in the English teaching community in the lead-up to, and during the course of the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) conference in 2003. In Victoria, we are currently in the midst of state-sponsored curriculum reform that will replace our Curriculum and Standards Frameworks with VELS – Victorian Essential Learning Standards, Victoria’s response to the same concerns as generated productive pedagogies in Queensland, and a range of similar initiatives in other states. At the same time, university teaching and publication cycles mean that my colleague Jo O’Mara and I have been revisiting and rewriting the off-campus versions of our English courses. We are reviewing what we see as essential, and how we’ll respond to the world of 2005 and beyond, including attention to our students’ digitally mediated textual experiences out of school and the implications of this knowledge society. There are other prompts to change and reflection too, such as the attacks on literacy education and educators in the press, leading to Parliamentary reviews of literacy education and teacher education, and AATE’s response to these attacks through the publication of a book Only Connect: English Teaching, Schooling and Community (Doecke, Howie and Sawyer 2006) outlining what English teachers and English teacher educators do, and why.
Two central areas of concern for English teaching as we work to re-conceive and re-imagine it for contemporary times are the role of literature and ‘literary literacy’ within a cultural studies framework – creativity and imagination – literature as both high culture and textual diversity – and linked to that, how English might respond, or is responding to technology and students’ immersion in it in their out-of-school worlds. Running through these is the pressing concern to help our students develop their capacities to think critically and with compassion, to develop a sense of community and social justice, to become highly literate in both traditional and newer literacies, and to be both able and inclined to contribute actively to the shaping of their present and future society. In this, we need to be present- and future-focused, but we need also to see these things as historically located; as recurring themes and motifs; looking for continuities and core values as we seek to prepare our students for a changing world.

**Contemporary context**

It has become commonplace to hear our world described as a globalised ‘knowledge society’. There are some powerful thinkers helping us comprehend what this means, and what the implications are for the children we teach and the schools we teach in. Hargreaves sees it this way:

> We live in a knowledge economy, a knowledge society. Knowledge economies are stimulated and driven by creativity and ingenuity. Knowledge society schools have to create these qualities, otherwise their people and their nations will be left behind. Like other kinds of capitalism, the knowledge economy is, in Joseph Schumpeter’s terms, a force of creative destruction. It stimulated growth and prosperity, but its relentless pursuit of profit and self interest also strains and fragments the social order. Along with other public institutions, our schools must therefore also foster the compassion, community and cosmopolitan identity that will offset the knowledge economy’s most destructive effects. The knowledge economy primarily serves the private good. The knowledge society also encompasses the public good. Our schools have to prepare young people for both of them. (Hargreaves 2005, p. 1)

He goes on to talk about his fears about the ways in which school systems are not fostering the creativity and ingenuity required to function in the knowledge society, but rather, becoming ‘obsessed with imposing and micromanaging curriculum uniformity’; squeezing schools and teachers into ‘the tunnel vision of test scores, achievement targets and league tables of accountability’. ‘Standardised Educational reform’ he adds, ‘is as valuable for a vigorous knowledge economy and a strong civil society as locusts are for a cornfield’ (p. 5). For teachers, he argues, teaching for the knowledge society ‘involves cultivating special capacities, not just any kind of learning in young people’. These include:

- developing deep cognitive learning, creativity and ingenuity among pupils
- drawing on research, working in networks and teams and pursuing continuous professional learning as teachers
- promoting problem-solving, risk-taking, trust in fellow professionals (whether they are close to you or not), ability to cope with change and commitment to continuous improvement as organisations (Hargreaves, p. 2–3)

A different tack is taken by Cherry Collins, who focuses on the fragmentation and dangers for curriculum consequent upon what she calls contemporary curriculum trajectories. At an Australian Curriculum studies conference in 2001 she spoke of the curriculum trajectories she identified, and what their consequences might be. They included:

- an instrumental trend (The curriculum will be justified in terms of its capacity to help children acquire skills for work and life … any part of the curriculum which cannot be justified in instrumental terms is in danger of losing its place' [with] a growing materialism which devalues not only spiritual knowledge but any form of understanding for its own sake)
- a trend towards an incoherent curriculum, (we are witnessing the demise of the view that schooling can provide a map of the reality in which our children are growing up, let alone of the reality in which they will have to live as adults),
- the emergence of ‘the self as project’ (‘A new if unacknowledged key learning area’) and
- a values curriculum for a shrinking world. (Australia is heading for an international curriculum ... that has a distinctly capitalist flavour ... to do with a world in which influential capitalist firms have a global reach and in which people are primarily seen as human resources ... Tolerance is the value of accepting functional relations with others. Schools are the instruments in the wider international labour market which ensure that at least this
minor value is inculcated … Today the aim is becoming the development of the skilled, self-steering, relatively ignorant but tolerant person) (Collins 2002, pp. 45–48).

As policy and frameworks for English curriculum are yet again undergoing re-examination and change, English teachers need a clear and articulated vision of what they value in curriculum for their students. We need to be proactive both in our classrooms and in contributing to public policy and debate in imagining and constructing what English in the future might do and be.

A different take on this moment in time that has considerable significance for us in thinking about present and future English concerns demographic change.

We are living in a defining moment of educational history, when the world in which teachers do their work is changing profoundly, and the demographic composition of teaching is turning over dramatically. The vast cohort of teachers who entered the profession in the expansionist decades of the 1960s and 1970s are retiring. Teaching is becoming a young person’s profession again. Whoever enters teaching, and however they approach their work, will shape the profession and what it is able to achieve with our children over the next thirty years. (Hargreaves 2005, p. 1)

These are sobering thoughts, invigorating as well as challenging, and particularly pertinent to those of us in the business of teacher education. But the future of the profession is in the hands of all of us. A consideration of what new teachers as well as more experienced ones both need and have to give is centrally part of our work as we reflect on what we value and care about in English, historically and for present and future times. In Australia, Barbara Kamler and Barbara Comber have recently been exploring what young teachers and old can learn from each other, about teaching reading and writing; the ‘secrets’ they don’t speak about but practice in their classrooms as they mediate between official policy and what they are passionate about and believe is essential to good learning, across the changing parade of different orthodoxies, fashions and regimes (Kamler and Comber 2003).

Green urges those of us in the English field to engage with curriculum scholars, and to think more about the centrality of curriculum in mediating these links between past, present and future. He argues that insights from curriculum inquiry are generative and illuminating in asking the questions ‘what shall we teach? And how?’ (Green 2004, p. 298) He cites Grumet and Pinar in mapping the ways in which curriculum – ‘a selection from the culture’ – might be metaphorically understood as both site and story; both notions foreground its role in bridging between generations and highlight the constructed and partial nature of curriculum and the purposes it is seen to serve:

I find myself coming back, time and again, to Madeleine Grumet’s (1981) wonderful formulation of curriculum as the story we tell our children about our past(s), our present(s) and our future(s) … More abstractly, perhaps, curriculum is, as Bill Pinar reminds us ‘a highly symbolic concept […] what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation’ and hence ‘Curriculum becomes the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world (Pinar et al. 1995, pp. 847-848) (Green 2004, p. 299)

We are by now overly familiar with the English/literacy debate, and pressing arguments about the role English ought to play in the curriculum and how it might be used or changed to support a broader range of skills and interests than it apparently does presently. We need to be careful here. While literacy undoubtedly is an important part of the province of English, it does not follow that the way to make English better serve the interests of all students, (including those who, in studies like the NESLS survey (Masters and Forster 1997), systematically fail to achieve the necessary levels on literacy tests) is to abandon other dimensions of the subject and turn it into a latter day version of the ‘literacy across the curriculum’ proposals of the 1970s. As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) observe in their analysis and discussion of the poor performance of many boys in relation to English and literacy, it is not necessarily the case that the best way to serve their interests is to remove opportunities for reflection and considered analysis. What is required is a rethinking of the ways we do English, the kinds of texts and pedagogies we attend to and employ, the kinds of writing, talk and making we provide opportunities for, alongside a greater diversity of texts and multimodality.

Kress argues we need to see English in the context of the whole curriculum, and take a social view in responding to the question, ‘what is English for?’

I concur with those who currently formulate policy in this respect: the question of English cannot be thought about seriously other than as a part of the entire school curriculum, and of its fullest purposes. That in turn cannot be thought about other than in the context of the widest economic, social and cultural considerations. Along with many others, I part company with current
directions in asking the questions about the curriculum not from a political but from a social and cultural point of view ... A social view takes the needs and problems of social organisations and those of their individual members, their structures and processes, as having prior importance ... From this perspective, the question around curriculum changes: What is it that education should offer so that those in school might lead productive lives in their near and medium term individual and social futures?” (Kress 2002, p.16)

From there, Kress goes on to argue for ‘deep purposes’ for curriculum subjects, (p. 17) rather than narrowly economic or utilitarian ones; in these times of instability and uncertainty as also for older times. He describes English as

the subject that provides means for understanding the relation of an inner world of imagination and desire with an outer world of culture and of social demands’ (Kress 2002, p.17)

This bridging of the inner and outer, this insistence on imagination and desire as well as socially critical perspectives and understandings brings together core features of what centrally characterises English. At the same time, these qualities are not just central to good English teaching; they are central to teaching more generally. ‘Purpose, passion and desire’ argues Hargreaves, are key elements in the larger processes of the management of change. ‘Desire’, he argues, ‘is at the heart of good teaching and curriculum reformers ignore this at their peril’ (Hargreaves 1994 p.12). In our concern to imagine and meet the future needs of our students, and to ensure the continuation and centrality of a subject like English in the curriculum, it is essential we hold onto such things; imagination, creativity and desire. Unless we do so, English becomes reduced to a service subject teaching basic literacy and perhaps tolerance. But what is equally clear is that we need to re-imagine English in ways that take account of the dramatically different present than the world of fifty, maybe even twenty years ago.

There have been a number of formulations of what centrally constitutes English in past and present times: literature and literacy; grammar, writing and literature; or Ethics, Aesthetics and Rhetoric, as Patterson (Patterson 2000 cited in Green 2004, p. 293) sums up the subject’s fundamental themes. But two at least of these three terms – rhetoric and aesthetics – (and arguably ethics too) need to be and are being problematised and re-conceptualised in our pluralist society and the digital age. Here’s Kress again:

In a period of instability, of the dissolution of social and cultural frames, neither aesthetics nor ethics seems possible ... Yet the absence of dependable social framings, the radical instability of social forms, demands the ability to make such assessments ... An approach that treats taste as socially produced and aesthetics as the effect of the politics of social evaluation over time, offers a set of principles that can become an essential social and cultural resource.

This makes questions of aesthetics and ethics into foundational pedagogical issues for English: not as a question of specific – say elite- forms, as before, but as a matter of all meaning production, whether of the banal or of the culturally and socially most valued ... these principles offer the unifying possibility of connecting 'high' aesthetics with an aesthetics of the banal and the everyday, linking the texts of Shakespeare with the texts of everyday life … This, I wish to argue, constitutes an essential pedagogic, curricular, cultural and social resource. (Kress 2002, p. 22)

**Literary literacy**

Conceiving of English as ethics, aesthetics and rhetorics provides a powerful framework for placing text and identity at the centre of our work, for working with both literary texts and those of the digital media, and for engaging with textuality and textual worlds. It’s a curious paradox to have arrived at a position where, having argued for years about the need to incorporate a wide range of texts into the curriculum, the time has come to mount arguments also about why literary texts should stay, as part of the broad mix of texts as Kress describes – or rather, to visit again why they might matter and how and why we might study them, in the kinds of worlds and contexts and purposes such as these.

Literature famously uses language in ways over and above what is necessary for the minimal creation of meaning. Critical literacy and poststructuralist theory take us a long way in identifying and understanding the ways words and texts and the intersections between contexts and readers work to shape meanings, readings and readers, to create hierarchies of taste and value together with ideological positionings. The exploration and application of dimensions such as these has been one of the most invigorating and important innovations in Australian classrooms, differently inflected from prep to Year 12 over the last twenty (thirty?) years, and has resulted in rich critical and literary curriculum exploring texts across the range from classical to popular. Core questions then become how to teach literary texts within these kinds of understandings in
ways that are both anchored in the social but also provide the means to attend in some way to that connection between the internal and external worlds that Kress describes, and to issues of aesthetics, values and identity.

In my doctoral research in the 1990s on Literature teachers in Victoria and curriculum change, I interviewed nine teachers across three years about how they responded to and experienced externally imposed curriculum change (Beavis 2000). At that time, a new, centrally mandated course superimposed curriculum and assessment requirements incorporating poststructuralist philosophies on top of older, more traditional theories in much the same way as we have seen happen since in many states across Australia. The focus of that research was on how these teachers took up aspects of the new curriculum in their teaching and assessment, and on whether and how it changed their views of literature, teaching and themselves. The research was interesting for a number of reasons, not least because it showed the ways in which, how we understand literature and ourselves as teachers of it, sit in an historical context, not just of what English is and has been, but also of historical debates and contexts and the discourses around English teaching more generally, which shape the ways in which we position and understand ourselves in relation to literature and curriculum change. The three discourses that seemed to me to exert this shaping power were those of Leavisite/new critical literary theory, critical theory as embodied in the Victorian Certificate of Education Study Design, and what I called the discourse of charismatic pedagogy, epitomised by the figure of Mr Keating in Dead Poets’ Society. These three discourses intersected with, what at that time I thought of as a fourth discourse, but would couch now more in terms of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus: the traditions and culture of the school. The teachers in my study, it seemed to me, were acting out of multiple imperatives and understandings in making the choices they did about what to teach and how. Their situatedness within these discourses, and the ways in which they were constituted as Literature teachers by them, had implications for the ways they taught, the stances they took up towards the new course, and the ways in which the discourses framed and organised their sense of themselves and the world.

What I was looking for, in part, in undertaking that research, was a way to understand and think about the complexity of the teaching of literary texts and literary literacy, and the ways in which this links into and is shaped by our constructions of the subject and ourselves, as also of our students, their context and world, and the purposes the subject serves – what it needs to do and be. Nearly ten years on, in searching for materials to update our readings, I have been particularly struck by the powerful role that reading and writing literature, wrestling with ideas and theory, have had in the accounts published in the series ‘My English History’ that has been running in English in Australia recently. Here’s Brenton Doecke (and imagination again) using and creating literature, combining multiple textual forms to explore his own ‘English History’:

'We need to imagine new forms of belonging …’
Eagleton 2003, p. 21

1. Sun on the Stubble

_Early morning_
Bruno brushes through the stubble to look at his traps
No luck. He pulls the pin out of the earth and awkwardly snaps the trap shut, to jingle the contraption at his side as he trudges to the next spot. A white scut as the rabbit frantically pulls at the trap, but there is no escape, and easing it out, then grabbing its back legs firmly, Bruno wrings the bugger’s neck. Taking his knife, he rips open its taut belly, and casts its steaming guts on the ground. The sun swings above the ridge and touches the stubble paddocks with long-handled brushes of golden light. In the distance, Bruno sees the farmhouse, its windows ablaze …

… No place for two boys on the property

I wrote this narrative fragment at the time of my father’s death, when I had just turned thirty. By calling myself Bruno, the central character in Colin Theile’s Sun on the Stubble, I hoped to gain a perspective on my experiences that would not otherwise be available to me …
(Doecke 2004, p. 9)

This literary beginning is the start of an essay that combines multiple textual forms and a long account of personal history, literature, teaching, writing, and theory to convey a vigorous intellectual and political life in English teaching, and something of the eternal complexity of that endeavour. Here he is talking about Lukas and his (‘Bruno’s’) thoughts on teenagers’ reading and Year 9:

_Lukacs’s own analyses of literary and artistic works clearly presuppose a ‘genuine aesthetically shaped susceptibility’ (pp. 235-236). But how does one acquire this ‘susceptibility’? How can one learn to appreciate the relationship between man and humanness’ presented in great works of art? The answer for me lay in finding out how teenagers learn to read and acquire the habits of_
discrimination and analysis that adults value – an experience which lead me to question those very habits that Lukas extolled, bringing me to a realisation of the multiple readings that any text can generate. It is a salutary experience for anyone to justify his or her tastes or 'common pursuits' to a class of year 9 students (Doecke 2004, p. 17)

Three points stand out here:

1. The interconnections, constantly, between literature and theory and the debates, stances and decisions that run through the life described.
2. The close interconnections at many levels between ‘ethics, aesthetics and rhetoric’
3. The role of history, once again, in providing explanatory purchase on present and future realities. The paper finishes:

I hope that when I was teaching English in secondary schools my classrooms provided sites where students could explore the complex relationships between language and identity and language and community, despite the fact that I was caught up in a set of practices that were reproducing social inequality … Now, as a teacher educator, I am once again experiencing a tension between my habitual practices and my sense of other possibilities, other ‘forms of belonging’ … The paradox in writing this essay is that the only way I have been able to express my desire to create a better future is in the form of a continuing conversation with my past’. (Doecke 2004, p. 17)

This essay seems to me to exemplify the kinds of connections Kress describes between ‘an inner world of imagination and desire and an outer world of culture and social demands’, a way of using, and inhabiting literature and the literary that informs the ways we understand, think and act in the world.

Here is Wendy Morgan, in the same series, writing about An Imaginary Life:

And I read and teach Malouf’s (1978) novel, An Imaginary Life, about the sophisticated Roman poet Ovid’s life in exile on the shores of the Black Sea and his encounter with a wild boy, brought up by wolves. The prose, and the storytelling, make me ache with their grace and beauty, fill me with an obscure desire they both slake and leave unsatisfied. And they show me how a theory about language and the imagination can be shown in a fictional world …

Here at last (here again) the aesthetic and cognitive pleasures of fiction and theory, immersion and analysis, merge, as this novel shows me how we and our world are made by acts of naming. My delights are redoubled as I apprehend that imagined world aesthetically and comprehend it cognitively, poststructurally. And I’m able to carry these delights and understandings into my teaching of this text – and others. (Morgan 2003, p. 11–12)

This is difficult, even fraught territory, the call to attend to this kind of experience within a socially critical version of English curriculum, or English as cultural studies. It’s about a manner of attending to texts as much, or more than, about the kinds of texts we might include in an English curriculum. This kind of attention – to this kind of textual engagement or experience – belongs not just to ‘literary’ texts but is characteristic of what gets called ‘literary literacy’. The ‘aesthetic’ has for the most part been too problematic and troublesome for us to get a handle on in recent times. But we need it. And so we find people like Misson and Morgan working to re-theorise the aesthetic from a poststructuralist point of view, seeking to find ways to think through again how literary texts like poetry might sit within a critical literacy classroom (Misson and Morgan 2006). Or Green, again, reprising the centrality of imagination from the writings of Boomer in relation to pedagogy and Bakhtin and Ricoeur in relation to literature; arguing for a version of ‘literary literacy’ which might allow ‘a more robust, rigorously social understanding of the relationship between literature and literacy’ which allows English ‘to re-engage with philosophy, the humanities and the arts’. (Green 2002, p. 30).

Morgan describes the theoretical task posed by this kind of endeavour as ‘explain[ing] to ourselves and others how as a profession we English teachers might reconcile our aesthetic engagements with texts with those more critically analytic, sociocultural forms of reading’ (Morgan 2003, p. 13)

Green cites Ricoeur:

Poetic language has a mimetic function inasmuch as it is a heuristic fiction preparing a redescriptions of reality. If it is true that poetry gives no information in terms of empirical knowledge, it may change our way of looking at things, a change that is no less real than empirical knowledge. What is changed by poetic language is our way of dwelling in the world. From poetry we receive a new way of being in the world, of orienting ourselves in this world. (Ricoeur 1991/Green 2002, p. 30)

He goes on to detail Ricoeur’s interest in metaphor and imagination, linking this to ideology and utopia ‘thus providing an important opportunity to bring together meaning and power’ (Green 2002, p. 31). It’s a complex and important article, and worth revisiting in full.

Observing young people’s fascination with textual worlds in their out of school lives, particularly digital
texts and contexts such as computer games, I’m increas-
ingly convinced of the necessity to recognise and attend
to the kinds of pleasure, nuance and close attention to
detail that gets called the aesthetic, or literary literacy, in
our work with students and texts of all kinds. It’s very
clear that much of the pull and attraction of out of
school digital culture, in particular computer games,
arises from their aesthetic and immersive power, and
that we can’t begin to talk with young people about
such texts, or ask them to become reflective or analytic,
let alone learn from them ourselves, without a view of
text that acknowledges textual pleasures and dimen-
sions such as these.

Technology
I want to turn now more squarely to technology and
multimodality. A great deal has been written about the
shift from page to screen (Snyder 1997) – ‘the broad-
based shift from print to digital electronics as the organi-
sing context for literate-textual practice and for learn-
ing and teaching’ – (Durrant and Green 2000, p. 89)
and the need for English teachers to attend to what this
means. Students need to become literate in both print
and multimodal technologies, to become critical and
reflective thinkers and active producers of texts and
meanings, and English, surely, is the obvious and
logical place where this kind of attention, reflection,
analysis and textual diversity should be found.

There is much to be said about the ways English
works with and is changed and challenged by technol-
ogy and about what technologically based English
curriculum might look like and entail. I want to
concentrate here, however, on out of school texts and
young people’s engagement with and what we might
learn from these. That is, I want to talk not so much
about how we might bring multimodal texts such as
digital popular culture into the English classroom as
about what we might learn about texts, engagement
and literacy from these out-of-school forms and what
young people gain from making them part of their
world.

Computer games present young people with rich
textual worlds, and themselves exemplify new forms of
narrative, new cultural forms. As such, they teach young
people a different set of expectations than is generally
assumed by schools about the nature of texts, about
participation in them, about pleasure and about liter-
acy. They teach young players that immersion in textual
worlds is challenging, satisfying, dynamic and extend-
ing. As new cultural forms, they link nonetheless to
older genres and narratives, and bring together the
multiple modalities of page and screen.

As exemplars of multimodal forms of semiosis, and
of new ways of constructing narrative worlds, computer
games bring together a wide range of characteristics and
forms. These include a shift from narrative to spectacle
as entertainment (Darley 2000), reliance on intertext-
describe as ‘remediation’ – that is, a remaking or
copying of older media forms. They call on an odd but
effective mix of first, second and third person position-
ning for the player, particularly in relation to one’s avatar.
Multimodal characteristics or elements that carry
meaning or significance, and that players need to attend
to include colour, sound, multiple images and split
screens, symbols, icons, gesture, print, spatial structures
and so on. Multiplayer games provide opportunities for
social interaction and reliance, but also for the develop-
ment of critical reading of others’ play and representa-
tions, the presentation of self, and the utilisation of
shared or distributed knowledge (see Beavis 2002
2004).

Games are built around purpose, identity, practice,
ongoing learning, situated meaning, distributed knowl-
edge, developing competence, discovery learning and
more. In the case of multiplayer games we can add in a
sense of community, peer culture, risk taking, control,
exploration and authority. In participating in online
culture young people are also dipping their toes in the
global entertainment industry, and the economic and
social imperatives of multinationals. Engagement,
imagination, and the experience of ‘flow’ are also char-
acteristic of digital culture and computer games.

What can we learn from this for our work in English
in schools?

• We need to learn from how computer games help
learners learn. Just as Meek claims of picture books,
that texts teach what readers learn (Meek 1988) so
Gee’s 36 principles (Gee 2003) powerfully identify
what we might learn about learning from computer
games.

• We need to learn from the social and purposeful
dimensions of young people’s engagement with
digital culture, the fluidity of on and offline literacy
practices and the deep investment in identity and
peer culture participation in such worlds involves.
We need to explore ways that work in the English
classroom around texts might similarly allow for
joint and individual engagements that matter to
students and that invite them to commit themselves both seriously and playfully.

- We need to find ways to engage our students with texts that will similarly allow them to be immersed, challenged and entranced. We need to find texts of all kinds, old and new; print, visual, oral, aural, digital, that are rich, imaginative and expansive to put before our students. We need to find pedagogies that will allow them to experience these texts with subtlety, discrimination and delight, and a sense of ownership, excitement and possibility.

**Conclusion**

In thinking about where English is going, and what we want to hold onto as well as to imagine for future times, we need to keep thinking about how we want to work with texts and literacies, and what the content and purpose of such a subject might be. The capacity Kress identifies for English to provide a means for understanding the relation of an inner world of imagination and desire with an outer world of culture and of social demands’ (Kress 2002, p. 17), framed in terms of attention to ethics, rhetoric and aesthetics, with attention to texts of diverse kinds, provides a powerful framework for thinking of what that curriculum might be, and of the absolute necessity for such a space to be part of young people’s education, in an increasingly complex world.

**Note**

1. An earlier version of this article was presented as a keynote address to ETAWA in May, 2005

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