

English through the looking glass, retrospect and prospect: global perspectives and common ground

In July 2015, the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) conference took place at Fordham University, New York. Hosted by the Conference on English Education, part of the National Council for the Teaching of English, the IFTE conference brought together scholars, researchers and educators from around the world. On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Dartmouth Seminar (1966), the conference – “Common Ground, Global Reach: Teaching English and English Education for Global Literacies” – generated a rich array of keynote addresses, panels, dialogues and debates about the state of English internationally and in diverse local contexts. Over the duration of the conference, a number of broad themes emerged particularly in relation to the complex challenges and conditions of teaching the English subjects within an educational landscape marked by:

- high-stakes standardised testing and assessment programs;
- neo-liberal educational reform agendas;
- the imposition of standards-based models and frameworks;
- a narrowing of the English curriculum;
- the innovations made possible by digital technologies;
- the intensified regulation and surveillance of teachers’ work; and
- forceful evidence of increasingly institutionalised educational disadvantage.

Surveying the educational landscape a decade ago, Halpin (2006, p. 332) concluded that:

[...] far too many of the most salient features of current educational practice in schools entail modes of negative technocratic hyper-rationality that requires pupils and their teachers increasingly to relate uninvitingly and at a distance from one another through the medium of official targets and associated modes of formal assessment.

From the sweep of research and scholarship disseminated at the 2015 IFTE conference, Halpin’s summation is as relevant, if not more apposite 10 years on: keynotes, panels and papers focused greater attention on the impact of “modes of negative technocratic hyper-rationality” on the conceptualisation and integrity of the English subjects; the current and future purpose of the subjects in schools; and the ways in which English educators can navigate and push-back against the constraining dynamics of political interventionism.

In this Special Issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* the papers address a range of the key ideas, concerns and perspectives offered during the 2015 IFTE conference. The Issue includes papers reporting on empirical, exploratory and theoretical research studies, along with curriculum and policy analyses and historical

curriculum inquiries. While a number of papers in this Issue explore the formative influences on English teaching that have had some international impact, other papers address a number of the “common ground” challenges of teaching the English subjects in countries where English is the medium of instruction and the English subjects occupy a central role in the school curriculum.

One of the noticeable dimensions of the 2015 IFTE conference was the recurring recognition and reinterpretation of the historical legacies of the 1966 Dartmouth Seminar: the seminal works, discourses, ideas and pedagogical approaches that took hold in the succeeding decades and have proven remarkably resilient across distinctive international settings to the present day. In the field of English education, substantial research and scholarship have attended rigorously to the historicity of the subject, detailing the lineage of influence on its formation and the theories, philosophies, ideologies, values and practice that have shaped, sustained, transformed, threatened or disrupted its identity.

It is fitting, therefore, that this Special Issue should begin with three papers that reorient our attention to the contributions of key figures in the history of English education and curriculum development. The opening paper by Goodwyn sets the tone for the Issue through its timely re-interpretation of John Dixon’s watershed publication from the Dartmouth Seminar – *Growth Through English* (1967/1975). By means of close critical analysis of the primary source text, Goodwyn provides a compelling case for the extent to which a number of the central principles and philosophies set out in *Growth* have been variously misrepresented, obfuscated, misunderstood or simply neglected by critics of Dixon’s work.

The conceptual and pedagogical model that emerged from Dixon’s *Growth Through English* – the “Personal Growth model” – has, according to the evidence from Goodwyn’s extensive historical survey of empirical research, retained its cogency and central significance for English teachers in England and other international jurisdictions. However, as Goodwyn goes on to illustrate, there now exists a formidable gap between teachers’ conceptualisation of subject English and the purpose of their work and that encoded in official curriculum documents, assessment regimes and teaching standards. The implications of this gap for the future of the English subjects, for teacher agency and for student learning are considerable and according to Goodwyn, can only be redressed by “a future model of English which is based on Personal Growth but with a more critical and social dimension”.

In many respects, Goodwyn’s paper is an evocative call-to-arms, highlighting the ways in which the international exchanges that occurred during the Dartmouth Seminar and the ensuing transformations in English teaching and learning continue to “stimulate new thinking” five decades later. The paper serves to reinforce the provenance of the subject’s identity and the durability of Personal Growth principles and ideas in debates about the purpose of English in schools. It also raises questions about the subject’s definition: questions that occupied another key figure in the history of English education – Peter Medway – whose work is the focus of the next paper in this Issue by Sawyer.

As is the case with Goodwyn’s paper, Sawyer’s contribution here underlines the affordances of historical research of this kind for contemporary inquiries into the challenges and potentialities of English in education. Unlike John Dixon, Peter Medway was not a delegate at the Dartmouth Seminar. However, as Sawyer notes in his

introduction, Medway “was a slightly younger curriculum thinker” who “contributed strongly to the culture of English teaching, particularly in the 1980s” in England, where he worked with or was directly influenced by what Sawyer refers to as “the intellectual pantheon of the British world” in the second half of the twentieth century, including figures such as Barnes, Britton, Rosen, Dixon, Stratta and Wilkinson.

Of specific value to readers will be the detailed and engaging exploration of the context and impetus for Medway’s extensive and innovative work in curriculum and pedagogy, and its keen relevance for the current educational environment. Sawyer undertakes a sequential analysis of six of Medway’s key publications: *Finding a language* (1980), “What gets written about” (1986), “Language with consequences” and “Into the sixties” (both 1990), “Literacy and the idea of English” (2005) and “English and Enlightenment” (2010). These six texts together form a solid corpus of material specifically aimed at thinking through the definition of “English”, some more elaborated than others, but all focusing on this central concept”. The analysis foregrounds the central and enduring themes of Medway’s work as they are reconstituted and re-envisioned over a period of several decades.

In their re-reading of the work of two pivotal figures associated with the Personal Growth model of English, both Sawyer and Goodwyn draw attention to what could be interpreted as the discourses of hope and conviction, inflected with a deep service ethic and intentionality for English as a subject to enrich and empower the lives of students, and by extension, society more broadly. They do so, however, without false nostalgia for a perceived lost golden age. Rather, they argue for the ongoing value of Dixon’s and Medway’s ideas and ideals for our thinking as educators living in a radically altered context to that within which these two figures were working. Both papers, in different ways, invite the reader to reconnect with the still-beating pulse of optimism and social justice that suffused the lifework and contributions of these two leading English educators.

While the enduring legacy of Dixon and Medway, along with many others associated with the Dartmouth and post-Dartmouth era is well-acknowledged, there are influences on the historical formation of English as a subject in schools that have remained less visible or neglected in the research in the field. One such influence is that of the nineteenth century German philosopher, psychologist and educationalist, Johann Friedrich Herbart. In the third paper in this Issue, Carter seeks to redress a component of the “forgotten history” of English curriculum by examining the ways in which Herbart’s ideas on education, teaching and learning were embraced and adapted in the early twentieth century across the USA, Europe and Australia. Carter locates the work of Herbart squarely in the historical movement known as the New Education and focuses in this paper:

[...] on the manifestation of three of Herbart’s key ideas in a uniquely Australian context: [...] “apperception”, a “many-sided interest” and “Inner Freedom”.

Through a close analysis of curriculum documents from the early twentieth century in New South Wales, mapped against materials from Herbart’s published works on education, Carter argues that the first state-wide secondary English syllabus of 1911 bears the hallmarks of Herbart’s original pedagogical and conceptual thinking. In the process of “retrieving intellectual history”, the paper posits the potential for this “lost

influence” to stimulate fresh ways of re-imagining the purpose, pedagogy and identity of English in the present and into the future.

These first three papers engage with questions of the subject’s purpose, pedagogy and identity through the lens of historical inheritances, enjoining readers to be cognizant of the rich seam of antecedent ideas, aspirations and visions that have fuelled debates around many contemporary versions of the subject. Each acknowledges the protean and contested nature of the subject over the span of its existence in schools. With this historical truth in mind, O’Sullivan’s paper – “Contested territories: subject English, teacher education, and professional standards in Australia” – examines in detail the impact and implications of a range of governmental policies, institutional regulatory requirements and national teaching standards on the nature of English as a subject and in the context of university-based initial teacher education programs.

Readers in Australia and internationally will identify with O’Sullivan’s observation that teacher educators, pre-service and accredited teachers alike must now negotiate a progressively more complex and constraining “regime of regulation”, spawned by the tripartite neo-liberal trope of measurement, accountability and productivity. O’Sullivan interrogates the cluster of policy reforms and prevailing discourses that have reshaped not only the nature of English as a subject in schools (through the introduction of a national curriculum in Australia in recent years) but also the very timbre of English teachers’ professional identities. As the paper argues, an ideologically driven and politicised system that enforces teacher and teacher educator compliance with a set of uniform professional, curricular and assessment standards has deleterious consequences for teacher recruitment and retention. On this point, O’Sullivan notes that “this is not a situation unique to Australia”, since international research studies have identified the causal relationship between levels of bureaucratic regulation and rates of teacher attrition.

Taking up the themes of subject English as a contested site and the impact of curriculum reforms on pedagogy, Liu’s paper provides insights into the processes of English curriculum reform in China. Liu argues that the new English curriculum, reshaped through appropriating “Western curriculum” paradigms, has “aroused a heated debate among Chinese scholars”. Liu highlights the significant tensions arising from, and controversies accompanying, both the transformations in the conceptual basis of subject English and the need for teachers to substantially adjust their classroom pedagogical approaches to meet the requirements of the new curriculum.

Although not directly emerging from the 2015 IFTE conference, Liu’s paper, along with “in dialogue” papers by Locke and Phan, Han, and Lee and Green offer important perspectives on the ways in which teachers in Vietnam and Korea, respectively, are prepared for and negotiate the implementation of an English curriculum that is encoded with Western-based cultural and epistemological assumptions. Each paper explores the nature of teachers’ work in such contexts, their capacity for professional agency and the complex amalgam of challenges they face as teachers of subject English in these distinctive cultural settings. Locke and Phan’s inquiry into the influence of culture on Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language teachers, for instance, reveals the powerful role of extrinsic affirmations from colleagues and those in authority in shaping a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy and professional self-belief. The paper highlights the culturally contingent and often unstable nature of this sense of self-efficacy and draws attention to the implications of this for the individual teacher and for the profession more

generally. The understandings presented in this paper resonate with the themes explored in other papers in this Issue pertaining to the effects of institutional, cultural and ideological variables on teachers' work and professional identity formation.

The cultural and cross-cultural challenges inherent in teaching English and literacies underpin Park's paper which reports on an empirical research study undertaken with immigrant youth in the USA. Park offers evidence of the utility of graphic novels in developing students' critical literacy and literacy skills more broadly, concluding that students:

[...]even while working to "break" the written code, were engaged in critical text analysis. In other words, English learners' struggles to decode the words did not hinder them in assuming the role of text analyst, and in questioning the creator's message, purpose, and worldview.

The suite of papers in this Special Issue offers readers thought-provoking scholarship on the state of English education and English teaching in an age of rapid reform and heightened regulation at the curricular and professional levels. While these papers examine the history, forces and conditions impacting on English teachers, teaching and learning in diverse local contexts, taken together, they also underline the considerable "common ground" being navigated and traversed by English educators internationally.

Continued research and scholarship in the field and its dissemination through forums such as the IFTE conference and this journal constitute a powerful avenue for collectively surmounting the challenges of the present and imagining the shape of the future for the English subjects in schools. The work of IFTE, for example, continues with the next conference planned for the UK in 2018. IFTE now has a book series and published a collection of essays, *International Perspectives on Teaching English in a Globalised World*, Routledge, September 2013, edited by representatives of subject associations in the UK, Australia and the USA (Goodwyn, A., Durrant, C. and Reid, L.). A second volume on *Literature and its teaching* is in preparation and will appear in late 2016. The third volume, of especial interest to readers of this Issue, will consider the legacy of Dartmouth to the development of the subject and the contributions of some of its leading figures over the past 50 years.

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Reference

Halpin, D. (2006), "Why a Romantic conception of education matters", *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 325-345.