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“I woke up and realised the ground had shifted”: the Shifting Terrain of English Curriculum

When musing about the topic of the dream I was lying in bed one night after a long day’s teaching, my head full of things to think about. I can always rely on my love of literature to inspire me, and I thought of a two literary works with dreamers at their heart. The first was Piers Plowman, (Langland, 1969) William Langland’s long, discursive, satirical, middle English poem, I studied for my honours thesis. In this poem, Piers the dreamer, who is a Christ-figure wanders through an allegorical landscape confronting a myriad of social estates, and cultural challenges and questioning his place in that world. There are some parallels between his situation and ours. The dreamer Piers confronted the corruption of the church and the state and was tempted by personifications of the seven deadly sins, before finally discovering he had to answer to his own conscience for salvation. We are confronted by the press and the public condemning what we do in English teaching and in the end we have to answer to our own consciences too. I’ll return to this idea and also to poetry later. Stream of consciousness thinking is rarely linear and my thoughts turned then to a second literary work, the novel *Lord Jim* (Conrad, 1949). Conrad’s character, post-shipwreck, was floating face-up in the vast ocean. He consoled himself by giving in to, ‘the dream and again the dream *‘ad usq infinem*’. With my life-partner five hours north up the Bruce Highway I had little choice but to sigh, lie back and think of English.

My head was crowded with challenges and possibilities as I thought of how to deliver a keynote that would stimulate what I knew would be a discerning, critical, creative and intelligent audience of my peers and colleagues – English teachers.

The problem: The ground keeps shifting

What a feisty, smart, crusty lot we are – soldiering on in the face of battle, now popularly known as the literacy/culture wars (Snyder, 2008). We are teaching at a time when it has become sanctioned to verbally bash teachers. Almost everyone who speaks English seems to have an opinion on how we should be teaching it. We continue our dedicated work in a profession which has very much become public property. It’s easy to feel weary of being told how to do our job, especially by reactionary, rather uninformed pundits in the Murdoch press who continue a vicious and unrelenting attack on our profession.

The theme of this conference comes from the epitaph on Lewis Carroll’s gravesite. “Is All our Life then But A Dream?” This seems fitting for a time when so much change in the terrain of English makes us feel as if we are somnambulating through a surrealist landscape. Like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, (Carroll, 2003) we might find ourselves at strange tea parties with bureaucratic mad hatters, and just when we think we have a grasp of applying new theory in our teaching, we fall down another rabbit hole, to swim in confusion as some queen calls out, ‘orf with their heads!’. The shifting ground in

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English inevitably moves in response to waves of theory influencing classroom practice. Each new paradigm has claimed to liberate language learners from the flaws of the previous model. Each linguist or literary theorist who shaped the new paradigm no doubt dreamt of a new population emerging from school as more powerfully literate citizens than the previous generation.

I argue that literacy is always at the front line of political struggle. Perhaps because people inherently resist change, many of these shifts have caused waves of moral panic over declining literacy standards. These panics are not new: recall the furore over rock and roll's diabolical influence on 1950's youth, or the hysteria over the 'hypodermic' inoculation of media, whereby children's brains might rot from exposure to TV and more recently the 'evil' effect of video games. The latest reactionary wave of conservatism over literacy has resulted in the federal push for a return to 'phonics' as the sole method of teaching reading in early childhood. Literacy as a part of subject English, has manifested as 'Essential Learnings' for testing in the middle years and the attempted wringing-out of critical literacy concepts from the senior Syllabus in Qld (QSA, 2008). The swell from this last wave has left some of us reeling and dumped on the beach.

I want to explore why these issues are important for us, by examining the eclectic 'body of knowledge' we draw from in our teaching of secondary English. I'm asking the question, 'how we can find some balance in our practice even as the theoretical approaches from the various 'models' of teaching that we have come to trust, have been undercut by political interference and bureaucratic policy?' The resultant backlash has seen Discourse and the critical becoming dirty words and the theoretical traditions they belong to almost expunged from recent policy documents. Some of the concepts remain in covert form. 'Reading position,' for instance is still present in the ELs for the end of year 9, and critical literacy is mentioned in a token way, in the 2008 draft senior syllabus (QSA, 2008, p.p 55). It's almost an add-on in an appendix at the end of a list of contradictory

approaches to Literature which would have young Alice's head spinning. The problem is that the concepts touted as being essential are not backed up by adequate, unified and coherent, theoretical explanation in the documents. This may be fine for those who already understand the theoretical foundations, but of little use to those learning the concepts anew. Because these documents drive our school-based programs we're left wondering how we can navigate the contradictory messages contained in the new draft Qld syllabus. It seems there is some alignment with the skills approach of the National Framing Paper for English (NCB, 2009), which itself has increasingly been attacked in *The Australian*. Here's the latest offering from the Murdoch press:
Reading syllabus hijacked by fringe
May 27, 2009. From: *The Australian*

The nation's most respected remedial reading experts have criticised the National Curriculum Board for caving in to the demands of a fringe group of university academics and teachers who argue against a back-to-basics emphasis on phonics in teaching reading.

The board, which is charged with writing the national guidelines on teaching from kindergarten to Year 12, has been accused of ignoring key players in drafting its latest advice on the shape of the proposed new English curriculum.

Researchers have told federal Education Minister Julia Gillard that the board, headed by chairman Barry McGaw, has failed to consider recommendations of the national inquiry into teaching literacy, which insists that the "explicit and systematic" teaching of the letter-sound relationships is required to learn to read. (Ferrari, 2009)

My reading of this made me ask, "I wonder who decides who is fringe and who are the central players?" The whole article can be read if you want to get mad or go mad. It goes on to wrongly describe Peter Freebody as a 'whole language' pundit, and professional associations as not being representative of teachers.

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The article claims that AATE and PETA are populated by fringe academics and are so poorly subscribed to by teachers that they are in danger of 'folding'. Can I ask at this point, amongst those of us here on a weekend, how many are CR teachers and how many are lunatic academics? I rest my case, briefly!

The point I want to make in response to this is that Language is our business in English and so is literature of which language is an integral part, both at the chalkface and in the pre-service domains. It would be a pleasant dream indeed, if all the pundits wanting a say in what we do would just let us do what we do best, which is to teach both language and literature underpinned by sound theoretical knowledge.

What is the body of knowledge of English? I think there certainly is a body of knowledge, but it's eclectic. We've moved through different influences of linguistic and literary theory and more recent cultural theory and surely these constitute a body of knowledge that we draw from to underpin our practices. However, to find a path through these influences and approaches, we have historically retained the strongest and rejected the weakest aspects of each model of English teaching. For instance, let's look at a very simplified and potted history of the models which have influenced the secondary English Curriculum in Qld in the last 50 years.

We've moved through approaches to literary criticism based on F.R. Leavis' premise that literature acts as a 'civilising' force in the 'cultural heritage' model of teaching. English and the 'skills and drills' prescriptive grammar approach to language persisted, along with the cultural heritage model into the 1960s. The model inculcated students into the dominant culture and espoused standards of correctness through the genre of the literary essay, where responding to canonical texts imitated 'proper standards of expression'. This is the approach that Donnelly (Donnelly, 2006) and others would have us return to in secondary English and we still deploy it to some extent in students' expository writing responding to literary texts.

The 'personal growth' model, with its emphasis on 'feeling' recognised students' active role in the

meaning making process of literature. Based on an 18th Century Rousseauesque concept of the 'natural child,' it was introduced in the 1970s, to allow students lacking cultural capital to respond to canonical literature in their own ways. At its best it drew on students' cultural values and knowledge. At its worst, it could elicit largely unfocussed responses to literature, based on a naive assumption that students as individuals could be the sole source of meanings, and that their 'feelings' somehow could speak the truth. The teachers' role here could be passive and non directive.

Enter the sociolinguistic, 'text-context' approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, which took account of culture and introduced a new grammar, Functional Systemic Linguistics. This approach aimed to liberate diverse literate subjects through linguistic deconstruction. Texts were studied contextually and Functional Systemic Linguistics could serve as a powerful system for reading and writing language in response to a wide range of texts; for their attendant audiences, purposes and contexts. Everyday texts from popular culture, such as film and video, were studied too, which added semiotics to our repertoire of textual analysis strategies. The weakness of this model is that it could be formulaic and sometimes resulted in students mimetically reproducing modelled texts.

Our programs eventually incorporated critical literacy concepts, such as Discourse, which posited that language is a sociocultural practice and all texts represent the world in particular and partial ways. This model had social justice at its heart and was especially powerful for redefining reading as a culturally constructed exercise. Critical literacy allowed us to investigate text-reader relationships, representations and intertextuality; multiple texts and multiple reading positions. If taught poorly, (and lack of professional development meant that sometimes it was in the beginning) it could result in a formulaic framework of critical investigations, which interfered with students' pleasure of the text. At its best it could result in powerful readers producing transformative responses to literature, which investigated meaning making in creative

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ways. I'm sure that the result of critical literacy has not been the death of civilisation. Nor will a return to an elitist, a Leavisite literary criticism model herald in a golden age of literacy for all. This reactionary turn is certainly no answer to social and economic inequities that currently exist in our education system; which militate against high equity, high quality bureaucratic rhetoric. Here I don't mean 'rhetoric' in Bill Green's construction of the term, (Green, 2008), but the more commonly known- connotation of rhetoric as euphemistic, platitudinous spin.

Taking account of the strengths and weaknesses of the four main approaches that have underpinned our English curriculum may seem complex and eclectic, but it works. The current situation combines the 'who', 'what' and 'how' of English in a coherent way, which is not carried through into the new draft Syllabus (2008).

'Does the new syllabus allow us to do what we want?' an erudite professor recently asked me. 'To an extent it does, but only if I know what I'm doing in the first place', was my reply. My position as a teacher of prospective teachers is fraught since on the one hand I want to teach students the concepts of critical literacy because I know how potentially powerful that makes them as teachers and as readers. For me, and I'm sure I speak for many teachers, critical literacy has become a 'threshold or core concept' (Meyer & Land, 2003), by which I mean there's no going back to former models where teachers and annotated texts did much of students' thinking for them. Once the power of critical approaches to text has been experienced by students, it's difficult to see how we could possibly go back to 'one true way of reading', which has been suggested by the draft syllabus as an option.

How do we balance the needs of our varied cohorts, when our classes typically contain mainstreamed students with learning difficulties, ESL, NESB, gifted and talented, behavioural and emotional problems in the face of 'high stakes' national and state testing? I have yet to see how these processes help us do our job or how the information from them really assists us to remediate real, quotidian problems our students have. It is not a level playing field and

it never will be. The very concept of a national curriculum threatens the autonomy of school-based assessment in Queensland. This approach to learning and assessment has allowed us to do exciting critical and aesthetic and creative English work, which is not ultimately limited by external examination conditions. Mostly up until this point we have not had to 'teach to a test', but NAPLAN has changed that.

How many of you have been busily rewriting your junior secondary programs to conform to the ELs? CL concepts are contained in the ELS but without explicitly described theory. On their own they are a poor substitute for a unified syllabus with a coherent approach to English study based on language and literature theory. At last year's state ETAQ conference forum (2008), one of the points made was that in Queensland we did not want to get to the position of having to teach to a test, but it seems we have had this thrust upon us and, if we are going to have to do this, we need to have a voice in what happens to the data and know why we are being asked to do this. How will it be tied to funding down the track? How will our students benefit from the testing? The snapshot results reflect a small slice of time in a students' experience of English in school based assessment. And what are the consequences? It is like saying this is what you are doing wrong, but without any viable solutions for changing inequitable conditions in schools. If the result of low scores on the NAPLAN mean schools will be shut down instead of resourced, how is this helpful to literacy? What is this saying about our culture and how is this indicative of an 'education revolution?'

There is always the cry, 'English teachers will work around it'. But I wonder why it is that we must. Why is it that we don't have a say in the translation of the underpinnings of our practice in our field, when we are the ones who must teach it? When political and bureaucratic interference in the curriculum takes place it smacks of other countries where freedoms are more centrally controlled. Do we really want to have so much freedom that it's no freedom at all? And what can we say of school-based

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assessment and comparability? If one school decides to take a Coles notes approach to Literature, based on a pre-war, 'one true way of reading' and another is doing a complex, critical appraisal task on multiple readings of poetry; or examining the multiple ways the media constructs the same issue through intricate linguistic investigations: which one is more powerful for our learners (Mc Guire, 2008)? One approach indoctrinates students into thinking exactly as a teacher or a learned critic might and then asks them to passively reproduce those meanings in supervised exams? The other approach equips them to read *all* texts of the world in which they live with a practised and critical eye?

The 'draft' 2008 syllabus

The previous (2002) Queensland Syllabus was not perfect and neither is any syllabus document. The most important thing for us to remember is that these documents are only as good as they are in practice. The criticisms levelled at the previous syllabus may have been solved by thorough professional development. Aligning ourselves with the National Curriculum is potentially regressive, since one size cannot fit all. We value school-based assessment because it allows us to teach creatively and critically and to empower our students with the ability to really read and to shape meaningful, contextualised responses to their reading of texts. The alternative is the memorisation of screeds of literary text for one exam, for an audience of one: the teacher/examiner, after which the content might be quickly forgotten by the student. The combined, coherent 'four approaches' model, informing the 2002 syllabus (Q.B.S.S.S., 2002), draws on a body of knowledge which combined the key historic models.

Consider this response from AATE to the national framing paper:

The key historic models which have shaped English over the last century need to be openly and fully recognised in the national curriculum... This will more effectively encourage teachers, informed by their

professional judgment and knowledge of their students, to utilise the full range of pedagogical approaches that the history of the subject has made available. (2009 p. 5)¹

... And...

A national curriculum that does not fully recognise existing subject understandings and practices, those that teachers have found to work with their students and which they identify as significantly informing their understanding of the subject, can only be a retrograde step. It amounts to nothing less than the deprofessionalisation of teachers. (2009 p.5)

The Qld draft (08) syllabus tries to present an 'anything goes' approach by listing all the approaches to literary theory known to humankind. This might sound liberal and freeing, but it's highly problematic when an appendix table provides potted principles and characteristics of various contradictory literary theories and models that 'teachers might use in the classroom...'. For instance, English criticism/ Leavisite criticism and 'New criticism', sit alongside Feminist, and Marxist criticism, Russian formalism and critical literacy and all appear as options teachers might choose. This appendix of the 08 Syllabus (QSA, 2008) shows a confused understanding of the influences on literature and language study, and are presented as if they are all of equal value and can sit comfortably alongside one another. Furthermore these are all supposed somehow to reflect aspects of 'literacy criticism' which is only one historical approach to the study of literature.

Leaving the decision of what to teach to teachers, in terms of the pedagogical approach and the assessment in the classroom is all very well, but as we all know here, this works best when the school has a unified theory to practice approach in its work program, which stands up to verification. And this works brilliantly, when teachers themselves can see the point. The draft 2008 syllabus seems superficially to offer an opening for teaching professionals to run

¹ Retrieved 20 April, 2009 [http://www.aate.org.au/files/documents/National%20English%20Curriculum%20Framing%20Paper%20-%20%20AATE%20response\(2\).pdf](http://www.aate.org.au/files/documents/National%20English%20Curriculum%20Framing%20Paper%20-%20%20AATE%20response(2).pdf)

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with eclectic approaches. But it amounts to a deprofessionalisation of teachers to regress to an ‘anything goes’ approach. This document places weak, old fashioned models alongside more recent theories with no account of the strengths and weaknesses of each model; nor even how one model emerged as a response to the previous approach.

It would be like teaching physics students to believe, as scientists once did, that the smallest unit of matter is an atom, when the body of knowledge which constitutes physics show this is certainly no longer the case. How is it that if the laws of physics which govern our everyday lives have moved on considerably and teachers are allowed to teach new ‘laws’ and theories in schools, the body of knowledge of English, also central to everyday lives has come under such scrutiny? The answer to that lies in majority rule. Whilst the Discourse of physics is a mystified domain understood by an elite group, English is the *lingua franca* of the contemporary world. Joe and Sally Public can say with great certainty, “I think and speak in English: therefore I am an expert on English.’ Corrupting Descartes’ epithet further, this thinker might continue... “Therefore I must also be an expert on how it should be taught”.

How do we navigate this terrain?

We’ve taken on every challenge of new thought, every new linguistic paradigm, becoming experts in language as well as literature. We also have challenge of incorporating new media technologies through the access and creation of multimodal and multigeneric texts in our teaching lest we become dinosaurs. When will this stop we might ask? How can we balance the myriad of influences that threaten to clutter our teaching palette and not end up with Jackson Pollock on a bad day?

What follows here are just my ideas, a kind of wish list from my experience as an English teacher and a scholar of literature, media and language. I use the royal ‘we’ here, by way of hortatorical inclusion, because I am in business of preparing new teachers to enter the field in which we all work together. I suggest we really

think about what we value as English teachers knowing what we know about *language and literature and learners*. Knowing what we know about planning for lessons and learning activities that are meaningful and engaging; knowing what we know about language, knowledge and power. If we recall anything from Foucault, let’s remember that this brilliant philosopher did reconceptualise power, not as part of a superstructure, but as an exercise which renders us more or less powerful in different contexts (Foucault, 1995). In our context, teaching English in schools, we do not need to be stymied by the apparent power of a single document, as confused as it might be. We can work out what we really want in our programs. We can value the autonomy that we still have in school-based assessment to plan varied, relevant, interesting and creative work programs, units and lessons, for our students. Thereby we can assist them to be powerful, critical thinkers and users of language, text researchers, participants and creators and yes, to even appreciate the aesthetic dimension of literature, whilst not being limited by regurgitation of examination facts and of memorised text.

So let’s teach them powerful grammar use, which means something in the context of their own reading and writing. The concepts of appraisal have been shown to have a direct effect on students’ writing, much more than any discrete, decontextualised, ‘skills and drills’ approaches to grammar (Ferguson, 2002). So yes, of course let’s continue to teach grammar, but hopefully in a more complex way than the 2008 syllabus suggests, which is limited to the level of the “well structured clause and the sentence.” The ELs suggests this level of mastery, for the end of year nine, so one would hope that senior students can develop understandings of more complex structures, to invite, create, challenge and contest particular meanings in texts.

Let us hope that students can continue to understand how texts construct particular reading positions, which they may choose to negotiate in different ways depending on the

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alignment of their values with those offered by the creator of that text. I heard one teacher, say recently, “I don’t know what other word I can use instead of Discourse”. Another teacher was heard to remark, ‘How can we not teach kids to think?’ Although we cannot conflate critical thinking with critical literacy, the latter certainly shares some of its terrain; that is to say, both engage critically and creatively with ideas and/or texts. To deconstruct and then reconstruct is a creative act in itself which can offer emotional response as well as intellectual stimulation and challenge. So, of course I think we must continue to do these things in our programs.

And what of our students being shapers/creators of their own texts? Test conditions certainly do not allow for the full scope of creativity in our students. Kress (Kress, 1995) and Green (Green, 2008) tell us that we need a focus on both form, design and creativity to do things with texts. In my view, Web 2.0 allows us to ‘dream up’ endless possibilities for manipulating and experimenting creatively with textual forms in our classrooms, in response to ‘aesthetic’ or literary texts. I am not conflating the two here, as I think aesthetic texts can take different forms to the traditional print based literary texts: hypertexts, blogs, mash ups, e-zines and digital storytelling allow mastery of different generic forms in varied contexts, narrative can be illustrated, as digital stories show.

I want to show you some work undertaken by my own students, which show how these approaches can be combined. Let me show you two different responses to the same unconventional ‘literary’ text; “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid (Kincaid, 1983). First we ask enabling questions of the text to work out students’ initial readings. Most students say it’s a procedural text, about how a girl should behave in a particular culture at a particular time in history. Students discuss various readings of the text, including whose voices are heard/ silenced. Most agree that the voice of the strict mother represents the dominant values of the culture. “Girl” deploys the cadences of literary texts, including rhetorical devices, like repetition and

poetic devices such as rhythm. Kincaid herself described the piece as a ‘lyrical vignette’. After processing the reading through personal and critical responses, the students are asked to respond by creating a new text. Most chose to respond in print form, some simply wrote in a similar style, changing the gender and time from Antiguan girl to contemporary Australian boy. Others, after a lecture and workshop on digital storytelling, chose digital platforms to respond. In the keynote I played two very different digital texts. Each was submitted with the students’ critical reflection of the composition process, which incorporated the literary theory. The first was a digital story, told entirely in images in response to ‘Girl’ by Caitlin Mackey. In her reflection, she discussed semiotics and the theoretical aspects of visual languages to convey meaning. The second was a ‘Slam poem’ by Christie Mylrea, an Indonesian Australian student, who inserted phrases in Bahasa Indonesian, as the voice of her mother. Both these responses ‘play’ with form and content and manipulate aesthetics to create entirely new forms of text using digital means. Both constructed cultural representations of what it is to behave as ‘good’ girl should. Such creative tasks would be less possible under test conditions, but school-based assessment allows it. So let’s celebrate that.

Visualisation: My dream went something like this

At this point in a speech, I invite us as a group to think of what might happen if our resolve died away under the weight of the current hostility towards our profession. The ‘problem’ section of this speech constituted the random thoughts that streamed through my consciousness as I lay awake, but I must have at some point drifted off.

The dream went something like this. (What follows is the transcript of my digital story, which was created with Photo Story 3 and copyright-free ‘Picasa’ images and sound effects)

I was back teaching at a Townsville school. I looked down and thankfully I was wearing more than a towel, which is one of my high anxiety

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dreams. I heard my colleague Margaret call to her students, 'Take out your homework. This isn't a charity'. Meanwhile I was sorting out which girl was going to play Captain Ahab and which boy was going to play the whale in Moby Dick, when a hissing missile shattered the glass window, narrowly missing my head. Still smoking, it was a tightly packed ball of papier mache, compressed from bits of the Australian newspaper.

I heard crunching on gravel, getting louder by the minute. Queenslanders think they hear the march of the jackboot, but we really only hear the gentle slap of the thong. This was the sound of hard leather on hard ground. Four English teachers gathered on the balcony and the sight we saw was not pretty. The crowd below was armed with a canon, with LITERARY emblazoned along its barrel in capitals.

We were vastly outnumbered by a motley crew of untrained vigilantes, cloaked with opinions. They held up banners: 'down with pop culture', 'ditch the critical' and 'Foucault is a sex pest'. A chant rose up as the vigilantes circled in the quadrangle below:

*No Crit lit, no electronics
Basics, Leavis, fun with phonics*

Suddenly a mutant lieutenant, loaded up the canon, shouting, 'why aren't you villains teaching literature!?'

'We are,' we yelled back. 'I'm teaching Moby Dick.'

'We have it on good authority that you aren't. We know it's true because we all cite one another. And we get published. You call text messaging and McDonalds – culture?' he yelled, 'Take this!' He lit the canon's fuse and we crouched down and prayed to Shakespeare to give us something witty to say to save us. Lieutenant Dumbdownelly stuck his pointy fingers in his ears and scrunched his eyes shut. 'Fire!' he screeched. The fuse reached its end and blew. Out popped bits of newspaper, which turned into vapid words, 'lefty, radical rubbish?'

We made missiles from copies of mouldy, old, Hamlet Cole's notes and 1960s grammar primers and gritting our teeth with 'skills and drills', feebly flung them at our attackers. They dissolved into mush. Knowing discretion to

be the better part of valour, we fled and found ourselves running towards the beach, throwing off our personal growth capes as we scuttled onto the sand.

Suddenly everyone was wearing togs and towels. Quickly we shovelled sand bare-handed to build ourselves some high ground. It fell down as fast as we could construct it. 'It's deconstructing. We need a functional system.' Someone threw on some bare assertions ("we are absolutely doing the right thing!") and graduated meanings ("it's quite likely that this will work"). It seemed to be working but there were gaps. Sand, scrape dig, shovel.

"There's another gap. Fill it in with commonsense assumptions," shouted one.

"Here use these old syllabuses. Lay them deep in the hole, so no ideology escapes. Let's chuck multiple readings in there to make it 3D. The meaning's not set in concrete, but it needs some scaffolding." Someone modelled some phonics clods out of clay and we slapped those on the mound. We threw ourselves into grunting nominalisations (digging, sweating) in search of some authority. Finally we stood back to appraise it, engaging and appreciating it (magnificent!). It was OK aesthetically, but perhaps we were just not being critical enough. English teachers will always find a way, so we all leapt onto it triumphantly, one by one. We held on to each other. Someone was wrapped tightly in a 'Critical Literacy' emblazoned towel and another amongst our huddle held up a shield with a big red D chalked on it. The sounds of our heavy breathing filled the air. We cocked our ears and listened for the sound of the muffled canon, its creaky wheels edging closer.

"Oi – what's with the big D?" shouted one of the clones, wearing floppy, cotton Y fronts with 'LITERAR' in front of the upside-down 'Y'.

'D- duh-I don't know what it means' replied another, 'I never studied semiotics, but I reckon they mean to do our heads in with those critical concepts.' We heard a boom – and out shot a salvo of vaporous word trails in the air, 'Bring back one, true way of reading.'

We stood solemnly together in the centre of the pile, feeling marginalised. The walls crumbled

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beneath our feet and we sunk into the sand, and as the backlash of the ocean tide of public opinion ripped out furrows beneath us, the canon and the cavalry edged ever closer (war music).

Lieutenant Dumbdownelly taunted us again yelling, "No one will publish your side". He became more simian with every taunt! "You can't resist". He started to dance. "Go on just try and defend yourselves."

'Well – what about theory? Surely that's still important to modify practise?' suggested one of the brave amongst us as she shook the D shield at our taunting attackers.

Up popped a cocky corporal dressed in 'Day-Glo' budgie smugglers. He grabbed Moon's handbook of literary terms to conduct his motley choir, chanting, "Theory is for snobs. Back to basics!"

"It was good enough in our day", yelled the Lieutenant, shoving in more newspaper, 'so it'll have to be good enough for that lot who can't spell or write a decent essay on Wilfred Owen. Up the war poets!'. His turgid words were punctuated by the sound of a blow torch flaring and he lit the fuse again with its furious flame.

We were sinking. We tried to run but our feet were stuck in sand. Just then a bunch of seagulls flew in and attacked the lieutenant with laughter. He turned and fled like a true war hero. Although the manic throng circled and chanted, their mouths moved mechanically like Computer Generated clones. The sound died away, they struggled for a morpheme, but not even a single phoneme issued forth. And the silence was eerie.

"Clearly phonics got them nowhere," I mused. I dreamt within the dream that I woke up in a lecture theatre full of hostile parents yelling, "Why can't my kids spell?" And I realised I was having an intertextual moment. I thought I'd woken up from the dream within the dream and realised the ground had shifted yet again. Here we go again. Waist deep in rising water I saw a slowly sinking, rubber dinghy with the acronym NAPLAN in large letters on its side.

You might think I'm being flippant by describing some of the shifting terrain of English as a dream, but these are real issues that affect us all at the chalkface.

'Take Heart'

So does the Queensland draft syllabus allow us to do what we want? Yes, it can. As I explained to my final year undergraduates, 'Take heart and don't let it get you down.' The challenging work English teachers have been doing over the last decade still has a place in the curriculum in Queensland. We will succeed because we *are* professionals, even if we are working in a hostile social climate. I guess we can be thankful this point that we are not bankers. If it is up to teachers to decide what goes on in our classrooms, then I suggest we remain professional and really value the rich body of knowledge we have to draw from. If we've learned powerful lessons from critical literacy, it is that we can always negotiate the text, even if the text under study is a syllabus document.

Let's return to what we fundamentally believe about learning and learners. For me as an educator, that means that learning is an exchange of 'meaning making' and that fostering an old-fashioned approach which suggests that students bring little to the table and therefore should reproduce the words of hallowed critics is regressive. Our body of knowledge tells us that the meaning students make represents the correspondence between the experience framed by the creators of texts (and the teacher) and the understandings constructed by the reader or interpreter – in our contexts this means our students. Sociolinguistic and critical approaches to the study of language and literature suggest we should make learning experiences and the texts under study relevant and contextual, including works of literature and everyday and popular culture texts. We cannot force students to appreciate the canonical literature that we might love. We *can* maximise the aesthetic experiences of our students by taking note of what gives them pleasure and teach these texts alongside more familiar pop culture texts. In asking students to respond to literature by using new media technologies we can potentially enhance their pleasure in meaning making by responding to strange worlds through exciting new forms. As resilient teachers, allowed to do our best work

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we can close the gap between the actual and the possible, by extending and challenging our students' experience and enjoyment of texts.

In spite of the barrage of skewed reportage, I submit that we have always taught literature. That we do it differently from our critics is to be expected, since decades have taught us new ways of doing things like reading and composition with texts. I want to close with a poem I was inspired to write this week in response to an article about a contemporary Afghani women's secret, literary society in the weekend paper (Lamb, 2009). I promised at the outset to return both to poetry and to the notion of conscience, and I think it serves as a call to action and a prick for our consciences, as well any other words might do.

For Nadia Anjuman, Afghani poet

*So let's all stop the whinge
Let's realise we are at liberty to doff our clothes
and skinny dip in the sea;
our erudite breasts
bobbing in clean ocean water.
Then resting in warm, sensuous, sunlight and
moulding into soft sand
we can openly celebrate sensuality, compose such
lines as these and
know this to be a freedom not everyone enjoys.*

*On the sand of other lands, shuffle the quiet,
dusty feet of covered women.
We do not need to conceal our poetry in sewing
baskets
subversively smuggled into basements after dark.
There secret meetings yield mutterings of Western
words in translation
And cloth, needles and thread craftily conceal
paper, pens and pencils.
And from these new art is created in mother
tongue rhythms of covert verse.
Forbidden by misogynistic militia
who throw stones, fire guns, ban music and
school for girls and grow long beards for God.
These women defy death threats to find a voice in
poetry,
to talk excitedly of possible worlds outside
imposed confinement.*

*Living in a time and place of privilege does not
allow me to demonise the other,
but I cannot find another word, but this, for a
poet's killer.
Since what but demons or delusions drive these
mad men
to render half their population invisible...
to stop their mouths from singing
to silence their poets
to conceal their female eyes behind a gauze of net
and bodies beneath powder-blue shrouds?
What strange power allows a prosodic clerk
to take account of his spouse's popularity
by first depreciating
and then writing off her life,
because she wrote poetry?
And what can we do for these sisters whose souls
shine brightly
in the dim light
and yearn for stimulation?
At least we can raise our pens and speak out with
our uncovered mouths
in praise of their bravery.
Our press, though not entirely free is actually a
luxury.
Even if they won't publish our side, at least we can
stop whinging.
Our own small pain seems insignificant
against our sisters experience of
reading and composing beneath cloth.
We could be grateful for the right to every word
that were allowed to write.
The poet Nadia's life has gone, snuffed out too soon.
But though we mourn her going, we can celebrate
her words.
Though she lies silent beneath it now,
she was not forced to write of her bright, defiant
life in sand.
Her poetry lives on paper and
in her sister's courage; in their scent of her memory
and pursuing their own literary art, by craft, after
dark.
At least it shows that art still has the power
to threaten repressive regimes
that verse is still subversive
and that words can still run deeper than the
wounds of swords.*

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