



AT THE STATE CONFERENCE, AUGUST, 2017: A personal reflection on the 50th anniversary of ETAQ

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It's a long time ago now, sometime in the late 1980s, I think, but I can still remember the excitement that I felt when I finally 'got' the text- in-context model of language in use. I'd been trying to make the paradigm shift for several years (I'm a slow learner) but it was Figure 1 at the front of the 1987 senior syllabus that gave me the framework for exploring language and literature from a completely new perspective. Over the coming years the model led me into increasingly interesting and challenging speculations. One of these was a provocative new concept of the 'self', a shift from the heroic self of liberal humanism to a post-modern self constructed from the discourses of our culture. The book that brought all of this together for me was *Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy* by Barbara Kamler, published in 2001. The self as text (within its context): an idea that could be depressing, frightening but also exhilarating.

So I pricked up my ears when Keynote Speaker 1 at the ETAQ State Conference on 19th August this year, Associate Professor Larissa McLean-Davies, addressed the issue of the nature of subject English. Given that the occasion was the 50th Anniversary of ETAQ it was inevitable that the nature of subject English should once again be explored and I loved Ms McLean-Davies' definition: English is 'us', the English teachers who, through our 'stories', our special knowledges and skills, our habitual practices and our particular use of language (and other symbolic systems) embody the subject through our-'selves'. 'We' *are* the subject English. 'We' *are* the text, English, within our culture's educational context. Ms McLean-Davies described the various approaches that have informed the teaching of English over the last 50 years (from personal growth and cultural heritage approaches to critical literacy) and explained that all of these belong to the discourse of English and can contribute to our embodiment of the subject.

Mind you, this places a special responsibility on the shoulders of English teachers. I was disappointed recently to read that many

teachers of Literature have little knowledge of literary theory. (English in Australia Volume 52 Number 2: 2017, 'English Syllabus Interpretation: The relationship between literary theories and teacher beliefs.') This won't do. We must be the best text that we can be. We must be experts in the field.

Just a side note but very relevant to English teachers: I was amused when Ms McLean-Davies told us that, in her university, teacher-trainers and their students in the field of Physics don't think that they have to speculate about the nature of their subject. Apparently it's a given, a body of knowledge, and they can move on at once to ways of improving their pedagogy. How Isaac Newton of them!! I remembered what physicist, professor of education and philosopher of science, Jay Lemke, has said about the nature of Science:

"The basic point-of-view is that science is a social process", (Lemke, p xi) (just like English through our study of language, literature and literacy in context), involving a field of knowledge, the dialogues undertaken between experts in the field and the special language (and other semiotic codes) used to communicate within the field and **not** a "paradigm of all expert knowledge, (that) has an objective, superior, and special truth that only the super intelligent few can understand." (Lemke, p 149.)

So the next time a Science teacher in your school says that their subject is an unproblematic body of expert knowledge just explain what a social process is and point them gently in the direction of Professor Lemke.

On reflection, this was yet another thought-provoking conference featuring high quality workshops delivered by professional teachers, interesting talks by authors Nick Earls and Marcus Zusak and useful textbook displays not to mention the usual networking opportunities for attendees. For me the highlight was that illuminating keynote by Professor McLean-Davies. It points the way to the future.

[Jay Lemke. *Talking Science: Language, Learning, and Values*. Ablex Publishing, 1990.]