CHAPTER ONE

Stepping from the Known to the Unknown: Rethinking Creativity in English Classrooms

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To cultivate a reflexive awareness of the language we speak is crucial to any effort to critically engage in the world around us. Raymond Williams taught us this years ago, when he selected ‘keywords’ to trace the changes in sensibility that characterize the capitalist era (Williams 1976/1988). He thus set out to chart ‘both continuity and discontinuity’ in the ways human beings have understood and participated in the society in which they find themselves (Ibid: 23). His inquiry involved grappling with the ‘deep conflicts of value and belief’ (Ibid.) that changes in the meanings of those ‘keywords’ reflected as England transformed itself into an industrial economy and imperial power. Not to be aware of how language shapes what we think and do is to remain trapped within the present, robbed of both history and any capacity to imagine and create a better world than the one we know at present (see Doecke and Parr 2011, Doecke et al. 2006).

A major aim of the inquiry conducted in this book is to make the word ‘creativity’ an object of scrutiny in the same spirit that Williams sought to identify ‘certain ways of seeing culture and society’ (Ibid: 15) in the words he chose for analysis. This has meant resisting the assumption that everyone knows what ‘creativity’ means. As editors, we have, instead, asked how English teachers use this word to name certain practices within the domain of their professional practice. The book explores how what English teachers mean by ‘creativity’ might differ from the meanings that others ascribe to this word.

At stake here is not simply a definition of the word ‘creativity’, as though everything might be resolved by going to a dictionary or some other glossary. As Bahktin remarks, we do not get the meaning of a word from a dictionary, but ‘as it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions’ (Bahktin 1981/1987: 294). This is to treat the word ‘creativity’ as a socially contested space (see Volosinov 1973: 93), as a small window on larger social issues, including the role of English teaching in contemporary society. Many of the contributors to this book are practising English teachers. They write about aspects of their experiences in their day-to-day professional lives, allowing the play between words and their meanings to take them where it will as they attend to those moments in their classrooms to which the word ‘creativity’ might apply. Although all are mindful of the need to work within conventional expectations as spelt out in documents like the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA nd), they have also moved beyond accepted understandings of the word ‘creativity’ in order to reconceptualize the nature of the exchanges that occur within their classrooms in new terms. In so doing, they show how their students’ imaginations exceed (and challenge) what adults expect of them.

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Yet it also has to be said that some of what they are writing about is not so new. For any inquiry into creativity in English teaching needs to confront the fact that historically English teachers have seen themselves as providing their students spaces for imagination and play, often in resistance to schooling as a mechanism for social reproduction and conformity. Wordsworth’s image of the ‘shades of the prison house’ that ‘begin to close upon the growing boy’ (as in his famous lines from ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’) has found its counterpoint in an equally Wordsworthian affirmation of the capacity of children and adolescents to be alive to the world around them, and to register their insights into their experiences in language that is fresh and engaging (see Reid 2003, 2004).

Open John Dixon’s Growth through English, his famous report on the 1966 Dartmouth conference and you find him celebrating children’s capacity in their writing to break away ‘from the customary view of things that society (so usefully) hands on to us through language’, connecting experience and language in an ‘original and personal vision’ (Dixon 1967/1975: 45). This involves recognition of children’s capacity to exceed what their teachers may have envisaged for them when planning their lessons. Dixon writes of ‘the liberation of pupils from the limits of the teacher’s vision’, a liberation that ‘comes through his [sic] growing tentativeness and sensitivity to language, qualities that are most likely to be developed if we teachers are on the look-out for emerging interest and preoccupations in the pupils, not merely in ourselves’ (Ibid: 48).

Or you could read the opening chapter of Margaret Langdon’s book from 1961, Let the Children Write, in which she reports on ‘an experiment in expression’ (Langdon 1961: 1-7). Confessing to the boredom she felt on marking the essays her students were producing for her—‘immature thought, immature expressions, immature writing’—she nonetheless remains open to the insights their talk outside the classroom made available to her:

Away from the dry-as-dust atmosphere of the classroom, the children would chat freely of their adventures, thoughts, ideas, dreams and fears. I would listen with interest as their young, excited voices clamoured to be heard. Here was no stiffness of expression, dullness of phrase, no stilted, lifeless thought. Here, pouring out, was the very stuff of life, pulsating and vibrating with vigour and individuality. They were eager to express, to tell, to put into words.

Ibid: 3

The challenge for Langdon then became one of opening up her classroom in such a way that the children could put behind them ‘the conventional methods of expression’ that were expected of them at school, which they themselves found embarrassing and repressive, enabling them ‘to recollect an emotional experience and express it briefly, simply and with honesty’ (Ibid: 7).

The very first issue of English in Australia, in November 1965, contains an essay by Brian Thompson in a style that is akin to Margaret Langdon’s account of her students’ writing. (Langdon’s work is mentioned in the editorial note to Thompson’s essay [Thompson 1965: 33]). Here Thompson recounts his anger at ‘the assorted measuring rods, the “out-of-ten” irrelevance and ratbaggery’ imposed on students by teachers intent on inculcating them into ‘grammatically impeccable compositions neatly written down’, who remain obsessed with the ‘teaching of rules, the eternal boredom of the prim essays wilting in their well manured beds’ (Ibid: 35). Against such practices, Thompson sketches the atmosphere in his library, where, in his role as school librarian, he is able to encourage children to write poetry by exposing them to anthologies of poems from which they could pick and choose verse that appealed to them. In words
that anticipate Ian Reid’s distinction in *The Making of Literature* (Reid 1984: 10-13) between the restrained mood of the ‘Gallery’ and the creativity of the ‘Workshop’ as contrastive approaches to the teaching of English, Thompson remarks that ‘the voice of the class is never a hushed respectful one, it generally shouts or cries or hoots with laughter or the joy of it all’ (Thompson 1965: 35).

Such accounts of teaching writing have been out of fashion for some time now. We do not need to tell you that there is a gulf between Langdon’s reference to ‘the very stuff of life, pulsating and vibrating with vigour and individuality’ and the language of ‘texts’ and ‘textuality’ that English teachers now habitually employ when giving an account of their work. The intervening period has seen the emergence of a heightened awareness of the way language pre-exists us, providing a resource for making meaning and enabling each of us to join a conversation that is larger than any individual’s realm of experience. It was precisely in this spirit that Raymond Williams selected his ‘keywords’ (1976/1988). The moment of ‘theory’ saw the publication of a range of articles and innovative resources designed to show how students might be prompted to develop sensitivity to the mediating role of language in their experiences (see Corcoran and Evans 1987, Gilbert 1989, Patterson et al. 1991, Thomson 1992). Ian Reid, for one, in *The Making of Literature* (1984), as well as in other writing (Reid 1999), has argued that an over-emphasis on ‘experience’ and on finding one’s ‘personal voice’ can blind teachers to the imaginative possibilities opened up by consciously borrowing from other writers, by recognising the ways that texts make meaning through their links with other texts, or by being framed ‘intertextually’ (MacLachlan and Reid 1994; see also Frow 2005, Doecke and McClanaghan 2014 forthcoming). Some of the essays in this volume explore ‘creativity’ of precisely this kind, showing how students can creatively appropriate other texts in order to make meaning.

But the school writing that these contributors celebrate is nevertheless driven by an impulse to make meaning and to communicate with others. It might be a matter of emulating a particular writer’s style or experimenting with a literary genre. Or perhaps it has been the opportunity to explore the meaning-making potential of the hybrid genres of popular media. The compositions by students that provide the focus for the following chapters still show them trying to give form and meaning to their experiences. And in this respect, the tradition associated with names like that of John Dixon and Margaret Langdon can still speak to English teachers in the 21st century, despite their apparent emphasis on a Romantic ideal of personal expression. For their basic message is that students should have an opportunity to engage in forms of communication that are meaningful to them, as distinct from the focus on achieving preconceived learning outcomes or (worse still) the drilling and skilling that figures so prominently in schools because of the imposition of standardized literacy testing. When teachers are forced to become preoccupied with mapping student achievement against reified benchmarks of performance, they run the risk of losing sight of the need to enable students to engage in authentic meaning-making activities in which they can personally invest. All the essays in this volume argue the need to recognize and build on the personal impulse that students invest in creating their own texts.

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A major culprit when it comes to denying the personal impulse behind the writing that students do in school, has been the so-called ‘genre’ school. With its promotion of a circumscribed set of ‘genres’, each embodying a set of rules into which students need to be scaffolded, ‘genre’ theory has been responsible for imposing a highly formulaic approach to the teaching of writing. This is certainly the case in Australia, where the dominance of NAPLAN risks reducing classrooms to places where students are treated simply
as 'spelling-punctuation-grammar producing machines', rather than as 'communicating beings', to use a distinction made famous by Andrew Wilkinson (Wilkinson 1987:3). What is imposed is a set of models for writing instruction that takes us right back to the 'grammatically impeccable compositions neatly written down', all 'willting in their well manured beds', which Thompson criticized in the 1960s (Thompson 1965: 35). This denies the learning that students experience when they are able to appropriate the texts available to them (such as through 'imaginative re-creation' [Stratta et al. 1973]) to produce writing that does not lend itself to classification as 'recount', 'narrative', 'information texts', 'instructional texts', etc. Writing in the vein of imaginative re-creation foregrounds students' capacity for imagination and play. When teaching is reduced to 'scaffolding genres', the result is — by definition — a 'flattening out' of difference. Moreover, the allegedly 'powerful texts' ('argument', etc.) of genre theory exist in a realm apart from the multiplicity of texts that actually mediate contemporary social exchanges and the ongoing development of contemporary knowledge and culture (see Doecke and McClenaghan 2011, Doecke and Breen 2013).

For too long, genre-based pedagogies have been framed within a simple 'genre vs. process' binary (see Richardson 2010, Moon 2012). The differences between the creativity of English teachers and students as revealed by their textual experimentation (a focus of many of the chapters in this book) and the formalism of genre pedagogy cannot be captured by the binary opposition between a Romantic notion of individual expression and an understanding of language as a social phenomenon that is prior to the individual. This binary has allowed the debate to be seen in terms of differences about degrees of student 'freedom', enabling the genre school to set itself up as defending educational standards against a pedagogy which is criticized for failing to allow students from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain access to the language of 'power'. Genre-ists particularly target 'growth' pedagogy, rejecting the value that people like John Dixon ascribe to 'play', 'imagination', and 'personal expression' (see Christie et al. 1991:17). This is in marked contrast to Williams' claims that creativity has a 'consistently positive reference' (1961/1973: 19) across ideological boundaries, for in their insistence that the teaching of writing is all about learning the rules of each genre, and their claim that empowerment can only be achieved through mastering those rules, they deny young people the creativity that is the most compelling evidence of the latter's capacity to actively engage with the world and to make it their own. 'Creativity' is positioned as the enemy in this discourse, perversely equated with student disempowerment, while empowerment is paradoxically equated with students simply doing what they are told. Further, genre theory avoids an explicit pedagogy to develop student writing. In defining macro-structures, genre theory has nothing to say about what could make a more engaging narrative, a clearer set of instructions or a more compelling piece of persuasion. This important work can only be done inside a pedagogy which looks to a range of literary models at the same time as it values what young people have to say.

We would like to suggest a different perspective on genre theory from its positioning against so-called 'process' approaches. In this we do not attempt any sort of reconciliation of binaries, or any overarching re-conceptualisation that resolves the theoretical differences between 'process' (or 'growth') and 'genre'. The current dominance of genre theory in Australia and the UK is a major problem when it comes to thinking about language and creativity — we do not deny that. But a far more generative approach to this issue that transcends the way in which this debate is typically played out is available in the work of Douglas Barnes. Barnes offers an important perspective on this issue through two entwined themes in his work: his theory of learning, and the problematizing of the language of school subjects.
Genre-based approaches argue for particular models of teaching, (e.g., modelling, joint negotiation, independent construction – see Callaghan et al. 1993). Barnes offers a theory of learning which is rooted in an understanding of the place of language in the classroom. He argues particularly the importance of the linguistic resources that students bring with them to school. Once this language is recognized and validated, students can be seen to make valuable contributions to the conversations that happen in classrooms. Language, according to Barnes, should not be seen simply as a means of earning social approval but as a vehicle through which students make sense out of what they are experiencing and learning. He argues that patterns of classroom interaction that give pupils the time and encouragement to explore the relationship between new knowledge and already existing knowledge are what is needed, because language, in his view, has a more expansive role than solely as a medium of communication. Some of Barnes’ most stimulating analyses of classroom interactions relate to the role that ‘exploratory talk’ (or ‘groping towards a meaning’, 1976: 28) can play in classrooms as students attempt in small groups to make those connections between new knowledge and old, drawing on prior experiences in order to gain new insights. That is why considering language as a means of learning and as the sharing of experience rather than only as a vehicle of formal communication (as in the ‘public’ forms of class presentations, debates, traditional Initiate-Respond-Evaluate [IRE] patterns of asking and answering questions or, we might add, the formalism of genre pedagogy) necessarily positions the learner as an active participant in developing school knowledge (Barnes 1976: 28-31).

Barnes’ research led to his postulating his well-known Transmission / Interpretation model of teaching knowledge and beliefs:

**Table 1: Representation of Barnes’ ‘hypothesising’ of the relationship between teaching as Transmission and teaching as Interpretation (Barnes 1976: 144-145)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transmission</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Believes knowledge to exist in the form of public disciplines which include content and criteria of performance</td>
<td>(1) Believes knowledge to exist in the knower’s ability to organize thought and action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Values the learner’s performances insofar as they conform to the criteria of the discipline</td>
<td>(2) Values the learner’s commitment to interpreting reality, so that the criteria arise as much from the learner as from the teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) Perceives the teacher’s task to be the evaluation and correction of the learner’s performance, according to the criteria of which he is the guardian</td>
<td>(3) Perceives the teacher’s task to be the setting up of a dialogue in which the learner can reshape his knowledge through interaction with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) Perceives the learner as an uninformed acolyte for whom access to knowledge will be difficult since he must qualify himself through tests of appropriate performance</td>
<td>(4) Perceives the learner as already possessing systematic and relevant knowledge, and the means of reshaping that knowledge</td>
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Teaching as Transmission values ‘the learners' performances [only] insofar as they conform to the criteria of the discipline’ (Barnes 1976: 144). Genre-based approaches obviously fall squarely into the Transmission camp. In terms of writing pedagogy specifically, teaching as Transmission treats writing ‘as
a means of recording or memorizing... at the expense of writing as a means of learning. Such writing fails to co-opt the learner's existing purposes and understandings; it has no part in the real world, but is merely an exchange of writing for numerical marks' (Barnes 1976: 145). Barnes' classroom research shows the problems that resulted for children's learning when the style of language that is regarded by teachers as 'appropriate' for a subject is in fact given more emphasis than learners' attempts to formulate meaning through using language already available to them. This leads into the second of Barnes' key themes: problematizing the language of school subjects.

Genre-based approaches claim to be giving social power to students by simply inducting them into subject-specific language forms (see Christie, 2013) – for example, promoting the importance of handling the formal conventions of an argumentative essay or privileging written language that is characterized by excessive nominalisations and the passive voice. It is hardly surprising, then, that students are constructed as 'deficit' or 'lacking'. Barnes allows us to re-conceptualize the genre debate by seeing the privileging of particular language forms as an 'entrance fee' (Barnes 1976: 129) to knowledge, thus asking key questions about the extent to which the 'appropriate' language of the subject can itself prevent learners from constructing knowledge. Students who are expected to leap straight to the specialist language of a subject early are often being asked 'to arrive without having travelled' (Barnes 1976: 118).

Thus, for Barnes, the educational 'problem' was not a lack of student knowledge or linguistic resources to communicate that knowledge in forms with which they were familiar, but failure to recognize their knowledge when not contained in stylistically appropriate language. Thus, while genre theory is about apprenticeship into the alleged genres of schooling and of subject disciplines, Barnes conceptualizes the language of schooling potentially as a barrier to subject understanding. The language of school subjects is characterized as a problem for some students' learning in those subjects because 'the teacher teaches within his frame of reference; the pupils learn in theirs' (Barnes 1969/1974: 29). Barnes opens up the language of schooling to a kind of interrogation that it has rarely seen since. His conceptualization of the key pedagogical issues around language is worth quoting at length:

How far is the language of secondary education necessary to the teaching of secondary school subjects? How can pupils best be helped to learn that part which is necessary?....The teacher's task should not be to introduce a new set of linguistic forms, but to help his pupils to use language to organize experience in a new way.... It is when the pupil is required to use language to grapple with new experience or to order old experience in a new way that he is most likely to find it necessary to use language differently. And this will be very different from taking over someone else's language in external imitation of its forms: on the contrary, it is the first step towards new patterns of thinking and feeling, new ways of representing reality to himself.

Barnes 1969/1974: 60-61 (our emphasis)

Such questions position the assumptions of genre theory as highly problematic.

Barnes' two key themes – the place of language in learning and the problematizing of the language of school subjects – were projects interrupted by genre theory. Teaching formulae for macro-structures is easier than researching issues around the relationship between language, pedagogy and thought. The phenomenon of language in classrooms was resolved by thinking of language only in terms of the 'literacies' of school subjects. The relationship between language, pedagogy and thought became 'solved' by the transmission of formulae – perhaps, to use the terms of the Australian Curriculum: English, this was a displacement of a focus on 'language' by a focus on 'literacy'.
What strikes us here as much as anything else is how Barnes envisaged learning in ways that echo Raymond Williams’ declaration that ‘it is...from grasping the known that the unknown...is conceived’ (1977/2009: 212). The confluence between Barnes on learning and Williams on creativity is remarkable – though perhaps it ought not to be, given that only a year separates the writing of Barnes’ *From Communication to Curriculum* and Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*. These are both seminal texts conveying a sense of a *Zeitgeist* that distinguishes their period from our own. This confluence also exists in the way each thought about ‘receiving’ and ‘making’. Barnes drew on Esland’s distinction between ‘world-receivers’ and ‘world-makers’ to describe the difference between those who have ‘transmitted’ to them the language forms of the subject and those given the opportunity to make sense of that material through thought and dialogue (Barnes 1976: 115,157). Here is Williams in 1961 on the creative mind:

> However successfully an artist may have embodied his experience in a form capable of transmission, it can be received by no other person without the further ‘creative activity’ of all perception: the information transmitted by the work has to be interpreted, described and taken into the organization of the spectator.

Williams 1961/1973: 46

Now, one wouldn’t want to take this analogy too far, as though the works of these two theorists can simply be collapsed together. The intellectual resources on which they are drawing and the readers they are addressing are quite distinct. Nevertheless, Williams’ understanding of the way the ‘spectator’ actively interprets and appropriates an artistic work resonates profoundly with Barnes’ work. For both writers, ‘interpretation’ is fundamental to how we all participate in the world: it is crucial to the way we learn and interact with others. iii

Further, for both Williams and Barnes, the process of the creation and interpretation of meanings is collaborative and relational. Artists, according to Williams, are the ‘voices’ of their communities, in the sense that their work is embedded in the social relationships of their times. But their work can also speak to subsequent generations, through a ‘continual recreation of meaning, by the society as a whole and by every individual in it’ (Williams 1961/1973: 47) that stretches beyond the moment of its creation into the future. This is to say that meaning is not fixed, once and for all, as in old-fashioned rhetoric about the timelessness of a work of art, but it is continually remade, as different generations interpret it from within the framework of their own values and beliefs, appropriating it in new ways. Similarly, Barnes sees language as a means by which we both ‘receive’ a meaningful world from others, and at the same time *make meanings by re-interpreting that world to our own ends*’ (1976: 101, emphasis in original).

Language is crucial here not just as a vehicle of ‘interpretation’, but ‘as a means by which we learn to take part in the life of the communities we belong to’ (Barnes 1976: 101), a claim also made by Williams (Williams 1977/2009: 37). For Barnes, *curriculum* is driven by *communication*. Curriculum exists not only in the intentions of policy, or syllabuses or programs – important as these are – but in the enactment of classroom dialogue by which teachers and students renew their lives each day. In this respect it is noteworthy that his communication-driven curriculum focuses not only on teacher-student dialogue, but on small group interaction and exploration, when students collaborate and talk together. Teachers’ ‘creativity’ (to focus again on the ‘keyword’ of our inquiry) consists in a capacity to be responsive to the worlds of thought and imagination that are opened up by students’ language, as they engage with one another in the social world of the classroom. Their creativity involves acknowledging and tapping into
their students’ impulse to communicate with one another. Above all, it means recognizing the unique character of their students’ experiences and the importance of providing them with opportunities to share those experiences and build on them in their interactions with one another, as opposed to seeking to contain them within preconceived learning ‘outcomes’.

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‘Experience’ is fast becoming the forgotten dimension of education, at least in the minds of some groups of politicians, education bureaucrats and researchers who are doing the ideological work necessary to support standards-based reforms. To affirm the centrality of students’ experience to their education is typically caricatured as showing a lack of understanding of the need to lift standards and as a sign of an old-fashioned sentimentalism that is hopelessly out of sync with the real world: schools need to knuckle down and lift literacy standards, rather than complacently producing ‘happy illiterate’ children’ (former Prime Minister Gillard in Bita 2009). Neither of the major political parties in Australia allows such sentimentalism to compete with human capital discourse, in which it is ‘the Australian economy (that) needs an education revolution…A revolution in the quantity of our investment in human capital. A revolution in the quality of the outcomes that the education system delivers’ (ALP 2007). This is a world where ‘education policy is, in many ways, economic policy’ (Pyne 2014). In effect, a new Gradgrindery has taken hold of education (see Parr and Bellis 2006), as the ‘facts’ in the form of judgments about students’ literacy abilities as measured against reified benchmarks of performance, are elevated to the status of ‘objective’ knowledge at the expense of the intimate knowledge that teachers are able to develop of their pupils through their social interactions with them.

Placing theorists of the calibre of Barnes and Williams at the centre of thinking about English curriculum and pedagogy should not be dismissed as an exercise in nostalgia. We are aware that our valuing of these writers brands us as belonging to the past, as distinct from the young people being targeted by the futuristic scenarios of neoliberal policy discourse. Yet it is precisely for this reason that the task of affirming the salience of the work of writers like Barnes and Williams becomes urgent. To echo yet another theorist whose work provides a powerful resource for resisting the closing down of the intellect that is occurring at present, namely Walter Benjamin, it is a matter of seizing significant moments from the past that remind us of alternative ways of imagining our lives compared to the world view imposed upon us by neoliberal ideology (see Benjamin 1970/73: 259-260).

We see ourselves as writing at a moment of generational change, but this is not to erect a barrier between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as in facile characterizations of the differences between Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Millenials. The policy environment into which early career teachers are now stepping is certainly different from that into which we entered when we ourselves were beginning teachers (see, e.g., Allard and Doecke 2014, Coulombe and Parr 2011), but the fundamental question remains as to whether the work of educators should be directed towards producing ‘spelling-punctuation-grammar producing machines’ or ‘communicating beings’. The challenge of accomplishing the latter is, however, arguably far greater than it was for the immediate post-war generation.

In March, 2014, The Guardian carried an article about teachers’ lives ‘inside the exam factory’, in which teachers across the generational divide are reported as bemoaning the state of education in the UK precisely in these terms: the relentless, seemingly daily, focus on preparing for standardized testing; the repressive measures experienced by teachers, students and their communities when a school scores badly in these tests; the ways teachers are endlessly positioned by politicians as the enemy (regardless
of the political spin about the central role that teachers play in a child’s education), and the degree of surveillance in place to ensure compliance. This, of course, is the perennial neoliberal paradox of governments tightening surveillance and compliance in the public sphere as they argue for greater market freedoms in the private sphere. One telling moment from The Guardian article deserves quoting in full:

"They actually said, 'Now do this, now say that.' The basis of it was being told exactly what to do. There was a geography lesson I wanted to teach, on 'Connecting yourself to the world'. I got told off, because I contacted someone in America who had the same name as me, and I got my whole class to write to her. We took photos out of the window, sent emails, and she replied. I thought it was great: she was in New York and we were in Dagenham. But I was told it wasn’t appropriate because it wasn’t what was on the lesson plan…"

Harris 2014

The image of schooling relayed in the Guardian article is not necessarily new – politicians have always tried to control curriculum, and imposing ‘teacher proof’ material to ensure that pupils are being drilled and skilled (and that schools are reproducing existing social hierarchies) is not new. But the extent of the control being exercised by governments as reported in this Guardian article reflects a degree of global policy convergence that is arguably unprecedented, as governments – particularly Anglophone governments – borrow their policies from each other, heedless of the specific characteristics of local settings (Sawyer this volume, van de Ven and Doecke 2011). As educators, we need to find the intellectual resources within ourselves to speak back to these reforms (to borrow the title of a critique of standards-based reforms as they affect English teaching that has been written by Graham Parr [2010]).

Part of the challenge of the generational change to which we refer here is that a new generation of teachers may have only known the teaching of English as it is represented in the Guardian article (Goodwyn 2003). Yet there is also evidence that this new generation of teachers are engaging critically in the policy context into which they are stepping (Allard and Doecke 2014, Parr et al. 2013), suggesting that it is a neoliberal fantasy to suppose that the thoughts and actions of teachers can be fully regulated by standards. Many of the chapters in this volume provide evidence of the capacity of a new generation of English teachers to articulate a larger vision of education than that imposed on them by standards-based reforms. The authors of these essays evince a creativity that enables them to be responsive to possibilities for imagination and play as their students participate in classroom settings that cannot be contained by particular kinds of calculations about the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Their experience as educators (to use that word again) is too complex and multifaceted for it to be parcelled up into the reified categories that typify standards-based reforms, providing a basis for professional learning of a far richer kind than that pre-determined by standards.

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The confluence between Douglas Barnes’ work and Raymond Williams’ life-long investigation into culture and society has emerged for us in the course of this inquiry as we have read and re-read drafts of the chapters that comprise the following volume, participating in dialogue with their authors. Williams’ work provided the starting point for this investigation into creativity – we invited all the authors to engage with his arguments, as he presented them in books like Culture and Society, The Long Revolution,
Keywords, Marxism and Literature and other work, and to consider how they might provide a perspective on their own understanding of creativity. For some of the authors, this was a prompt to revisit other writers (e.g., Deleuze, Arendt) whose work has enabled them to re-envision what happens in their classrooms. Our basic intention was to reaffirm the importance of re-engaging with important theorists whom standards-based reforms have marginalized or simply forgotten. We wanted to show how Williams’ work or that of other writers over the past few decades can provide an alternative philosophical framework that might challenge what are often quite problematical assumptions about life and society that are embedded in those reforms.

The challenge is to find ways of researching language and literacy that actually do justice to their complexity. Those researchers who want to measure everything always end up measuring something other than the phenomenon in question (see Delandshere and Petrosky 1998). They construct a version of literacy that has nothing to do with literacy as it is practised in everyday life. It is only real to the extent that it manifests itself in the form of the results of standardized testing and other calculations such as ‘value add’ and ‘effect size’, which in turn have a very questionable effect on the way classrooms are organized and on the relationships that teachers are able to establish with their students (in this respect, several of the contributors to this volume take issue with the way that John Hattie’s work [2009] has been used in educational debate). The argument that emerges from this volume about creativity challenges reified notions of measurement, attempting to refocus on the ways in which students actively engage in the world around them, using whatever semiotic resources they have available to them to make meaning from their experiences.

Pivotal to this inquiry have been the words by Williams that form one of the two epigraphs of this collection, that ‘creativity and social self-creation are both known and unknown events, and it is still from grasping the known that the unknown – the next step, the next work – is conceived’ (Williams 1977/2009: 212). The grand scenarios of neo liberal policy documents are all about stepping into the future, but this future is hardly conceived as ‘unknown’. On the contrary, the major impulse behind such documents is to ensure that the future looks pretty much the same as the present. The world depicted by such documents is, in short, the world as adults see it, not a world as it might be imagined from the standpoint of young people for whom everything is mediated by a sense of promise, of adventure, of as yet unrealized potential (Doecke and Pereira 2012, Benjamin 1996/2004). Williams captures this sense of the possibility of rebirth and renewal, as one generation replaces another, when he equates ‘creative practice’ with ‘our practical consciousness’, thus embedding ‘creativity’ in the process by which people renew their lives each day and ultimately the culture they share as ‘a whole way of life’. He characterizes this as an ‘active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation’ (Williams 1977/2009: 212).

‘Creativity’, according to Williams, is nothing unless it is anchored in the process of creating the world in which everyone is a player. Cut adrift from the creative work that people collectively perform through the activities in which they engage each day, creativity becomes reified as a specialist pursuit. (In another famous essay, Williams scathingly refers to the culture of ‘the teashop’ [Williams 1958/2001: 12].) But, as Williams conceives it and as the authors in this collection argue and illustrate, ‘creativity’ means actively participating in the world as the product of our own making. Creativity, for Williams, is an intensely reflexive process, involving ‘a struggle at the roots of the mind’ (1977/2009: 212). This is because creativity leads to a heightened consciousness of oneself, of others, and the larger society, involving a struggle with accepted beliefs in an effort to grasp new ways of seeing and understanding

Barnes’s vision of classrooms connects with Williams’ understanding of creativity because it is also a vision of making. The world of the classroom is not static, but something that is created each day, as people come together to talk with one another, share their experiences, and generally learn how to get on. And, like Williams, by conceptualizing the social world of the classroom as a continuing process of negotiation between the people who participate in that space, Barnes embraces the possibilities that are opened up by stepping from the ‘known’ to the ‘unknown’. This is the point of his famous distinction between the intended and the enacted curriculum, whereby the ‘creativity’ of teachers inheres in their capacity to open up opportunities for imagination and play that exceed the expectations that might be spelt out in a lesson plan or syllabus.

We have already indicated how schools have historically been characterized as the enemies of creativity. (We could think again of Wordsworth’s Ode or Mr Gradgrind’s school in Hard Times.) The discourse of this book does not subscribe to this critique; it is too easy. By contrast, the chapters that follow show how everyday forms of creativity are realized in schools, anchored in the relationships between students and the pedagogies of teachers as they enact them within classroom settings. The creative potential of young people and the creative practices of teachers in supporting them to realize their potential are always mediated by the institutional settings in which they find themselves (Smith 2005). We believe it is far more fruitful to explore the possibility of creative work within these settings, rather than speculating about what might be possible were students and their teachers miraculously able to transcend the institutional frameworks in which they are currently obliged to operate. That kind of treatment of creativity paradoxically diminishes it, as do rarefied notions of the ‘aesthetic’ as something apart from everyday life (see Roberts 2006, Arvatov 1972), as something that is contained in concert halls or art galleries (or in Williams’ teashop). The chapters in this book show that creativity can be ‘ordinary’ (to borrow again from Raymond Williams [1958/2001]), that it is a common possession, something that inheres within every moment of our lives, as we entertain the possibilities that might be opened up as we step from the present into the future, from the ‘known’ into the ‘unknown’.

We commend the following essays to you as each in their individual ways steps from the ‘known’ to the ‘unknown’.

References


Harris, J. 2014, Teachers: Life inside the exam factory.


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i) National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. This is a national assessment instrument given to students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in Australia. It is focused on Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and Numeracy. It is high stakes testing since schools’ results are made public on a league table website known as My School, which, as in the UK and USA, is positioned as a key instrument in school ‘choice’. See Ball 2002, Ravitch, 2010, Rizvi and Lingard 2010, Orlando and Sawyer 2013.

ii) Throughout this essay, the gendered language is left as Barnes originally wrote it in 1976.

iii) Williams’ argument about art as ‘the organization of experience’ (Williams 1961/1973: 47) also has echoes in the work of Barnes’ colleague, James Britton, on language, which Britton defines as ‘a highly organized, systematic means of representing experience, and as such it assists us to organize all other ways of representing’ (Britton 1970/1978: 21).

iv) It hardly needs to be said that this doesn’t mean we are not concerned with illiteracy. The key issue is the way ‘happiness’ is positioned as the binary opposite to ‘literate’ and the easy dismissal of the former.