



**JAMES BRITTON** was the chief architect of a theory of language and learning which has influenced the thinking and practice of generations of teachers across the anglophone world. With colleagues, Britton explored the relationships between language and thought, and between thinking and feeling, the links between unconscious and conscious ways of knowing, and the symbolising nature of language.

Britton's work helped establish talk as a serious activity in classrooms. It asserted the importance of young children being able to use their home speech in their learning in school. And it gave an account of written language development which suggested a way of classifying the different purposes and audiences for writing in school, and proved what a narrow range of these potential kinds of writing most children experienced.

Another important aspect of Britton's work lay in his observations of young children. His interest in early language development drew on private and personal experience, including extensive observations of his own children and grandchildren. His best-known book, *Language and Learning* (1970), fuses observation and theory in a remarkable synthesis, and demonstrates the continuities between early language functions and later more complex literary achievements.

What, then, are we to make of Britton's legacy today?

An anthology of excerpts from Britton's writing is available online (via the LATE website).

Hard copies will be distributed at the conference.

## Conference Programme

**9.30 am:** coffee and registration (Drama Studio, level 1)

**10.00 am:** **Keynote Lecture:** Myra Barrs and Tony Burgess

**11.15 am:** coffee break

**11.45 am:** **Workshops** (rooms to be allocated on the day)  
(Conference participants to choose one workshop.)

**1.15 pm:** lunch (Drama Studio)

**2.00 pm:** **Panel Discussion**, chaired by **John Hardcastle**

**Panel:** Douglas Barnes, Jane Miller, Simon Gibbons,  
Anne Turvey, Myfanwy Marshall, Mehrunissa Shah,  
Lisa Moore, Heather Wood

**3.30 pm:** finish

As a newly arrived English teacher in London in 1968, **MYRA BARRS** was soon introduced to LATE by Tony and Carol Burgess. This began a long association with LATE and the Institute of Education, where she studied for her MA and PhD. James Britton, one of the founders of LATE and the Head of the Institute English Department, was a regular attendee at LATE meetings. Britton's seminal work *Language and Learning* was published in 1970; the editor was Martin Lightfoot, whom Myra subsequently worked for as an editor at Penguin Education. In 1974 Myra became English Adviser in the London Borough of Brent. The Bullock Committee, of which Britton was a key member, published its Report in 1975 and its recommendations became an agenda for LEA English Advisers. Throughout her work in Brent, her 20 years as Director of the Centre for Language in Primary Education (CLPE), and her subsequent projects, Myra's work has continued to be influenced by Britton's focus on the learner, on language and learning, and on teachers as observers and researchers.

**TONY BURGESS** trained at the Institute of Education in 1964, where the team of James Britton, Nancy Martin and Harold Rosen was in full flower, as they collaborated with colleagues in London schools both in teacher training and in undertaking the developments in English teaching that led ultimately to language across the curriculum and to the Bullock Report. James Britton was Tony's tutor, unforgettable as a teacher and formative as an influence. Tony joined the Institute English department (as it was in those days), after some years working in schools, and was a member of the research led by Jimmy which led to *The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18* (1975). Tony's focus since then has included language diversity (with Harold Rosen) and the processes of language learning in classrooms. He maintains his interest in English teaching now as a co-editor of the journal *Changing English* and through membership of LATE and NATE. He is also chair of governors of a school in Camden.

## WORKSHOPS

### 1. Ripples from a Stone – How Students Learn about Literature

#### **Barbara Bleiman**

*Former Director of the English and Media Centre, Education Consultant and novelist*

#### **Andrew McCallum**

*Director of the English and Media Centre*

Our workshop will look at the ways in which James Britton's work underpins much of what we at the English and Media Centre take for granted about the ways in which classroom activity can be designed to help students develop a genuine engagement with literature. We will share examples of practical classroom activities in order to explore some of the key ideas that Britton wrote about so powerfully.

#### *Key questions:*

- What are the implications for work in the classroom of seeing reading as an interaction between text and reader?
- How can we promote what Britton refers to as 'satisfaction' in the reading process, in a system predicated on the external rewards and compulsions of assessment?
- If, as Britton, suggests, students' prior experience and knowledge, and own frames of reference, are important, how can we build on these in teaching literature?
- What is the significance of expressive talk (and writing) as a means of developing thinking and understanding literature?

## 2. Make-believe Play and Making Meaning: James Britton and the place of drama in learning

### **Theo Bryer**

*Lecturer in English and Drama Education, Institute of Education,  
University College London*

### **Anton Franks**

*Associate Professor in Creative Arts and Education, University of  
Nottingham*

Through a form of workshop drama based on a story, we shall be drawing ideas from Britton's work and from his contemporary in the world of drama, Dorothy Heathcote, to explore connections between make-believe play, language, role and their place in learning.

*Key questions:*

- What might be the continuing place of make-believe play and drama for children and young people in classrooms?
- How might more recent work on making meaning contribute to and extend Britton's work on language learning?

### 3. Learning in the Primary Classroom

#### **Dave Reedy**

*General Secretary of the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) and Co-Director of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust. Until 2014 he was Principal Adviser for primary schools in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham*

The session will focus on the insights of James Britton into talk in primary classrooms. Various transcripts of learning conversations, in both English and other subjects, will be shared and discussed in the light of Britton's writings and current developments.

#### *Key questions:*

- How can Britton's work help primary teachers to come to deeper understandings about talk for learning?
- What are the implications for the ways in which teachers and other adults might develop their conversations with children in school?
- What are the implications for how we plan for children's talk in classrooms?
- What would be seen and heard if effective classroom talk were present?

## 4. Children and Teachers Learning to Write

### **Jeni Smith**

*Jeni Smith, Visiting Senior Fellow, University of East Anglia, is co-author, with Simon Wrigley, of the recently published book *Introducing Teachers' Writing Groups: Exploring the theory and practice*, 2016*

This workshop will address the very real need for us to reconsider what we understand about how children become writers. We will revisit the taxonomies of writing developed by Britton and his colleagues in the light of today's classrooms. We will undertake some writing together, reflect on own writing and discuss samples of children's writing. I would like to develop a conversation in the workshop about the ways in which children, and teachers, can achieve agency as writers – through writing.

### *Key questions:*

- How can James Britton's work inform our current understandings of children's work as they become writers?
- How might we move in the spaces between transactional, expressive and poetic?
- What place does the expressive have in 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms?

## 5. New Forms of Writing

### **Sarah Horrocks**

*Director of London Connected Learning Centre which works with schools, using digital technologies to support learning across the curriculum. Sarah has a particular interest in digital writing and received a bursary for a study visit to the New York City Writing Project and NYC Hive Learning Network in 2014.*

James Britton said that children's writing in the early stages should draw on their existing spoken language resources and be 'a form of written-down expressive speech'. He argued that 'Expressive language is a form that favours exploration, discovery, learning'. Similarly, Britton and his colleagues considered the writer's 'sense of audience' and how young writers, in becoming communicative, need to internalise an audience, including (eventually) wider and more public audiences.

Today, young people are writing more than any previous generation, for a wider range of audiences than ever before. Much of their writing is for their own peer group and is often expressive writing – written-down speech. Through texting, messaging, email and blog posts, new categories of writing have emerged. This workshop will draw on recent research into school blogging to explore how blogging and other forms of digital writing are changing writing and how teachers can use these opportunities to further students' learning.

*Key questions:*

- How we can we relate the ideas of Britton and his colleagues about a) the expressive function in writing and learning, and b) the value to the writer of writing for a widening range of audiences, to new developments in writing?
- What is digital writing and how is it different from conventional writing?
- What educational opportunities are offered by digital writing and publishing?

## 6. Talk and Learning in Contemporary Classrooms

### **Gill Anderson**

*Lecturer in Education, Institute of Education, University College London*

The first part of this discussion group will consider examples of talk from some secondary classrooms through the lens of Britton's work. The invitation is both to re-examine our own assumptions about learning but also to consider what stories from today's classrooms we might offer to amplify Britton's ideas. Taking the following questions as a starting point, in the second part of the discussion, we will share ideas for promoting productive talk in the English classroom.

#### *Key questions:*

- In our current context, where individual ability and target setting are a priority, how can we plan in a way that recognises 'education is an effect of community'?
- With the ever-present pressures of assessment requirements, what kinds of approaches will help pupils to use talk for 'operations' rather than 'dummy runs'?
- What sort of classroom talk will ensure that we avoid the danger 'of imposing a disjunction between thought and feeling?'

## 7. Talk, Learning and Diversity

### **Valerie Coultas**

*Senior Lecturer in English, School of Education Kingston University and Chair of the NATE Multicultural and Diversity Committee, author of Constructive Talk in Challenging Classrooms, 2007*

### **Stuart Scott**

*Director of the Collaborative Learning Project and Secretary of the NATE Multicultural and Diversity Committee*

We will take you back to the heady days of the 1980s, before the National Curriculum, when there was a powerful synergy between teachers and researchers. We were constantly asking ourselves what were the most effective classroom environments for London children where many were learning English while they were experiencing the excitement of learning. The work of James Britton and his colleagues led us to appreciate the power of talk and personal experience in creating classrooms that were both EAL/bilingual friendly and at the same time, empowering for all learners. Our discussion will consider some of the new research that confirms Britton's hypotheses and we'll provide you with lots of practical classroom activities that scaffold talk.

*Key questions:*

- Why is talk so important for bilingual learners and for language development?
- How can teachers plan to involve all pupils in talk and collaborative learning?
- What lessons are there in James Britton's work for re-establishing personal experience in the teaching of English?
- What kinds of stories and teaching approaches help to develop intercultural learning?

## 8. Poems as Patterns of Experience

### **Gabrielle Cliff Hodges**

*Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.  
Gabrielle is the author of Researching and Teaching Reading:  
Developing pedagogy through critical enquiry (2015).*

The workshop will begin with one of James Britton's important pedagogical ideas about students reading poetry aloud together in the classroom: 'Some of the most valuable discussions of poems I have heard in school have been ones that made an indirect approach. They have been in fact discussions as to how a particular poem ought to be read'

(Britton, 1982, p. 12). I will talk about how and why PGCE student teachers more than thirty years on still explore poetry choral reading with students in the classroom, including through film and performance, drawing on poems such as Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken' and Eavan Boland's 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited'. From there, we will move on to debate some of Britton's most searching questions about the nature of poetry and poetic writing and how far these stand up to scrutiny in the light of more recent writers such as Seamus Heaney.

The session will enable us to consider the significance of the following questions, both in the contexts when Britton was writing – as a poet, teacher and teacher educator – as well as their continuing value for teachers and students today.

#### *Key questions:*

- What constitutes a poem?
- In what ways are readers and writers of poetic writing spectators or participants?
- What special kind of attention does poetry require?
- What power do the grammatical forms of poetry exert?