

London Association for the Teaching of English

Becoming our own experts

Research and
English teaching



Saturday, 10 March, 9.30 – 2.30

UCL Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL

Conference Programme

9.30: coffee and registration

10.00: Keynote: **Becoming our own experts: what counts as evidence, and whose evidence is it anyway?**

John Yandell

11.00 – 12.30: **Workshops**

(Each workshop will involve a series of short presentations by teacher-researchers.

Conference participants to choose one workshop on the day – see following pages.)

12.45 – 1.30: Keynote: **It's Good to Talk: Developing Group Work in English**

Barbara Bleiman and Richard Long

1.30 pm: lunch

KEYNOTE 1

Becoming our own experts: what counts as evidence, and whose evidence is it anyway?

John Yandell

Now, more than ever before, research matters in education. From early years onwards, schooling has been datafied. The spreadsheet rules. The performance of individuals and groups, and of their teachers, is recorded, tracked, monitored. Futures are foretold, careers made and ruined: the attainment of particular categories of data (evidence of progress, grades attained, and so on) has become not merely part of the experience of schooling but also the means whereby learner and teacher identities have been reshaped.

At the same time, organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation have achieved traction in public discourse by popularising certain research methods. In a classroom near you, someone will, more or less at this moment, be conducting an RCT. Meanwhile, behaviour tsars make statements about the importance of particular forms of research literacy (and the unimportance of other fields of inquiry). And PGCE students seek ethical clearance before asking six-year-olds what they like about school.

Amid this enthusiasm for research, how are teachers positioned? What history lies behind these developments – and what other histories have been forgotten or marginalised? Should teachers be seen merely as the recipients of research, that their practice might become better informed? Is research simply a process of establishing what works? Are teaching and research categorically different activities? And how might we begin to think about teachers and research in ways that gave teachers some agency in these processes?

John Yandell has been an active member of LATE since the 1980s.

KEYNOTE 2

It's Good to Talk: Developing Group Work in English

Barbara Bleiman and Richard Long

In 2015 the English and Media Centre (EMC) set up a self-funded project, led by Barbara Bleiman, to investigate group work and group talk in English – what it has to offer, what makes it successful (or less so), what it's good for (and conversely what it isn't good for). We wanted to go beyond the broad, sweep of pedagogical comment and research, which is rarely focused on subjects, to look closely and analytically at how group work operates in the subject of English.

We started working with a group of about 10 teachers in secondary schools, with new members joining along the way, one of whom was Richard Long, Head of English at St Michael's School, High Wycombe.

In this session, Barbara and Richard will be giving a flavour of the project, with a focus on the nature of the research, how our work has evolved and what kind of impact it has had on some of the teachers and Departments involved. Richard will be explaining how his school has engaged with the research project and what has happened in his department, in terms of both thinking and classroom practices since they became involved.

Barbara Bleiman was previously Co-Director of the English and Media Centre and now continues to work there as an Education Consultant, editor of emagazine and co-ordinator of the *It's Good to Talk* project.

Richard Long has been teaching English for 14 years. He has been an Advanced Skills Teacher and is currently Head of English in a 3-19 all through school in High Wycombe. He is also an Assistant Principal Examiner for GCSE English Literature.

WORKSHOP 1

Dialogic Teaching and CPD

Martin Billingham

The aim of this paper is to highlight the process in which the dialogic classroom CPD can create a culture of expertise amongst teachers. It can support students in becoming better communicators and subsequently more effective learners. The CPD takes teachers through a cycle of reflective practice: observation, analysis, working diagnosis, group evaluation, re-planning and reapplication. This enables them to effectively monitor and track the progress of their students' ability to absorb, build on, synthesise and interact with the contributions of others. Utilising grounding text and case studies, internal case studies were created from recording and transcribing dialogue, followed by separate group observation, discussion and reflection between teaching staff. Using the four strands of oracy, this research demonstrates the process of balancing effective speaking & listening skills – the key qualities of students' interaction. The result is a curriculum for oracy (construct for speaking and listening) that can be built within departments. One that truly reflects the communicative learning needs of students and adaptive to changing cohorts and individual needs, whilst also cultivating a team of staff engaged in exploring dialogic interaction theory through reflective practice.

WORKSHOP 1

In what ways does experiencing rehearsal room pedagogy with a Shakespeare text help participating teachers, in a South East London Primary school to develop their classroom practice?

Lucy Timmons

Rehearsal room pedagogy was a term coined by the Royal Shakespeare Company to describe how the work of professional actors can be used by teachers in the classroom. The body of literature on this subject is located in writers and practitioners who align themselves with the process drama concept and ensemble learning, originating in the work of, amongst others, Peter Slade, Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton. I present an insight into what happens when four teachers in a primary school in South East London, in an area of low social mobility and high deprivation, work as part of a community of practice to explore rehearsal room pedagogy as part of an action research project focusing on its effects on teacher agency. The originality of this study is that the teachers are working with a participant observer who has dual competency both as a deputy head and as a professionally trained actress. The major finding of my research is that the feeling of surveillance experienced by the teachers as a consequence of the current 'results – driven' climate can limit their teacher agency and restrict their openness to practices that are arguably key to children developing as democratic, engaged learners.

Exploring the implementation of a critical literacy approach towards guided reading

Victoria Baker

This practitioner-led research study explored the implementation of a critical literacy approach within guided reading, inspired by Leland, Harste and Lewison's (2013) educational mantra: 'Enjoy! Dig Deeply! Take Action!'. The study aimed to examine the extent to which children can embrace opportunities to achieve Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys' (2002) four dimensions of critical literacy: *Disrupting the Commonplace*, *Interrogating Multiple Viewpoints*, *Focusing on Sociopolitical Issues* and *Taking Action to Promote Social Justice*. The research also considered teaching strategies that could support children's achievement of these four elements, whilst examining the obstacles that might hinder their critical responses.

The research was conducted at a two-form entry primary school with six middle-high ability year 6 pupils. During guided reading sessions of Elizabeth Laird's novel *Welcome to Nowhere*, critical literacy was implemented through dialogic engagement (Aukerman, 2012), as the children read the text and responded through critical discussion. The findings recognise that navigating the published literature to develop a secure understanding of critical literacy poses a key obstacle for teachers wishing to implement the approach. However, it also concludes that the children successfully achieved the four dimensions of critical literacy, supported through use of dialogic teaching, social-issue themed texts and teacher questioning.

Creativity in Writing: Using the work of the National Writing Project for to promote teacher and student wellbeing

Helen Atkinson

How can we be teachers of writing if we do not write regularly ourselves? What are the therapeutic benefits of writing for both teachers and students? How can writing for pleasure be integrated into a curriculum that supports student achievement?

The National Writing Project has been running since 2009 and three teachers from Isaac Newton Academy have been involved in the project as writing group leaders. With the opportunity to design a curriculum from scratch, we have embedded the principles of the NWP into the Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 curriculum. This presentation will explore the impact of the NWP on the professional development of teachers, including promoting teacher agency and empowerment. It will explore the effect of creating a community of teachers as writers who write together on a regular basis and share both their own writing and experiences of teaching writing. In addition, it will examine the impact of fortnightly imaginative writing sessions on developing students' confidence and resilience as writers. A happy side effect of these sessions has been excellent exam results.

This is the story, with evidence from teachers and students, about the five year journey of an English department that has strived to provide regular opportunities for imaginative writing to flourish.

WORKSHOP 2

Reading Partners

Vic Watkins

I am involved in a school *reading partners* ongoing project which involves Year 12s paired with Year 7s. I am in the process of exploring this further, attempting to probe beneath the surface of this project: for example, who gains what? Does it need to be Year 7s who are deemed 'weak readers' as it currently exists? What would help Year 12 students to feel 'prepared' for the partnership? And is 'raising the Year 7s' reading levels really the main goal of this?

Reading for Pleasure

Madalein Simpson

The investigation I conducted for my MA dissertation centred on a paradox: the efforts of a compulsory state institution to influence what students experience as 'pleasure'. Despite frequent pleas from Ofsted for schools to do more to foster students' independent wider reading habits, reading for pleasure, with its connotations of independence and curiosity, has arguably suffered in the current culture of high stakes accountability in schools, because its practice potentially detracts from teacher direction and the learning of examined content.

By interviewing staff and students, I aimed to ascertain the 'meanings and values' they attached to pleasure reading in a school context. From here, I hoped to gain some insight in how to act meaningfully to influence our students' reading habits.

WORKSHOP 2

Reading and the primary classroom: teachers and pupils as readers

Shelly Boyce

Reading in primary schools has always been the subject of intense scrutiny, usually in relation to the discourse of expected 'levels' of literacy – in which pupils and their teachers are often found wanting, left navigating the tension between the demands of a standards-driven curriculum, at the same time being exhorted to develop in their pupils 'a love of literature'.

As part of my Master's degree, I explored the idea of 'reading teachers', described by Teresa Cremin as 'teachers who read and teachers of reading'. I wanted to investigate the relationships teachers have with their own reading and how far this shapes their approach to reading with their pupils. What do teachers read and do they share their interests with pupils? My findings indicated that the teachers in the sample would benefit from more support and advice in order to develop their own knowledge of children's literature and thereby 'a community of readers'. For the purposes of this presentation I will focus on one important part of the research: the reading opportunities and the range of texts we offer pupils. This led me to think about our own school library and the 'double-decker library bus' was born!

WORKSHOP 2

Navigating ‘rivers of reading’ in choppy waters: Small-scale qualitative reflections on the opportunities and challenges of using ‘rivers of reading’ in a hospital school setting.

Katie Kibbler

Looking at teacher reflections, student artefacts and interactions between students and teachers both on- and off-line, this small-scale research project seeks to explore the ways students at school in hospital have engaged with reflections on their reading lives, and how the Rivers of Reading work by Gabriella Cliff-Hodges may act as a way of validating and encouraging these experiences at a key point of transition in the children’s education.

Considering possible implications for teachers’ understanding of students, and their subsequent planning choices; the particular context of the hospital-based school environment and students’ feelings about learning during admissions; and students’ attitudes to reading whilst patients, findings tentatively suggest that ‘rivers of reading’ could be a useful tool for teacher and/or student reflections on both past experiences and thinking about the future.

WORKSHOP 3

Reading Cultural History in a London School

Mehrunissah Shah

The central question within my research is how students of diverse backgrounds make sense of the literary texts that are found in classrooms and how this meaning-making is then negotiated (or complicated) by the presence of me as their teacher. When considering what 'culture' is I assume the view of Edward Said, 'it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation'. It is perhaps notions of 'representation' that I am most interested in, though.

I will draw upon my teaching of a mixed ability Year 10 class. We are currently studying the AQA Poetry Anthology cluster 'Power and Conflict'. Their notions of 'power' and 'conflict' alone have raised questions of the different competing cultures within their lives. Their experiences are wide reaching; these students reference incidents with the police, gangs as well as the conflict of between caught between two different cultures: their own heritage and that of a more secular British identity.

The role of literature: perspectives from my department

Rosemary Lunt

In my daily teaching practice, as a head of English in North London, I continually face the challenge of making sense of the unquantifiable value of literature learning, which I see as a way of opening up new possibilities in students' thinking about their own social worlds and their positions within them. I am also acutely aware of the how classroom discussions of texts are enacted under the influence of numerous, and often contradictory, factors: curriculum diktats, school and national policy, teachers' pedagogical rationales and backgrounds and, critically, the "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2005) students themselves bring into the classroom. This paper will present an overview of some of my initial findings from a series of interviews I have conducted with departmental colleagues in a North London academy. Through semi-structured discussions, I have explored the differences and commonalities in our pedagogical approaches to literature, a process which has highlighted for me the vast range of rationales and justifications for pedagogy at play in our classrooms.

What is the reality of the relationship between politics and English in the modern day classroom?

Alexander Hawes

What is the reality of the relationship between politics and English in the modern day classroom? Are teachers merely helping their students to identify the political messages in texts and to understand how they are constructed? Or are they offering opinions and evaluating them? What are the official guidelines? Do English practitioners have a duty beyond literacy? What influence does the current political climate have? Is the type of school and its geographical location significant?

I am a secondary English teacher of seven years' experience, who has recently started a PhD project looking at the presence of politics in the modern day English classroom. Although only four months into my research, I have already done some work within my current school with both A Level and GCSE pupils, as well as colleagues. I am now looking to share my research thus far with other practitioners and to get their views and possibly even their predictions as to what I might find when I visit other schools in the coming years.

Whose *Othello* counts?

Sarah Newman

My paper focuses on two A Level pupils' responses to *Othello*. They objected strongly to what they perceived as the overwhelmingly racist narrative of the play. This interpretation was influenced powerfully by their experience of texts in English classrooms up until this point. I suggest that by attending closely to students' responses to literature, we get a very different sense of their identity as readers and their relationship to the 'set texts' under study. The strength of my pupils' responses to *Othello* encouraged me to consider what other interpretations of the play I could expose them to which might offer them an alternative way of viewing the play. The Market Theatre in Johannesburg's production and Patrick Stewart's version of *Othello* at Shakespeare Theatre in Washington D.C. captured my pupils' imaginations and influenced their understandings of the play.

Pupils Who Write Creatively in English in their Free-Time: Motivated Learners with Lessons for Language Educators?

Paul Morris

L2 English pupils' creative writing in English, often in the form of fan fiction, has flowered with the development of the internet. Many teachers of English in Sweden are familiar with the student who has an interest in fan fiction and who seems enormously keen to use English. The paper considers the findings from interviews with 13 pupils in Sweden, aged 13-18 years, who write creatively in English in their free-time; some of the respondents write fan fiction, but not all. The global span and scale of audiences opened by the internet is addressed in the paper, as is the variety of forms of creative writing, from comic strips to songwriting and fan fiction. The respondents in the study include pupils with a vast international network but also some who work more traditionally, offline.

Do the pupils consider that they progress in English as a result of their free-time creative writing? If so, in what way? What has motivated them to start, and what makes them continue? The paper is an analysis of the first study of a licentiate thesis project, using socio-cultural theory as a framework (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The study has been based on the questions of: What can language educators learn from these pupils and how can pupils' free-time writing be made an asset in the language classroom?

WORKSHOP 4

Beowulf and Heorot come to Milton Keynes: the classroom as a social space for exploring a canonical literary text

Meera Chudasama

I am currently an English, Media and Film Studies Teacher at a school in Milton Keynes. As a 'research and development co-ordinator' in the school, I am interested in the CPD possibilities offered by research that involves practising teachers. We have established an in-house research journal in order to 'spread the word'.

The piece of research I will present stems from my interest in how students use literature to make sense of their worlds and to construct their identities. I argue that learning is quintessentially social and talk is at the heart of this in the way it can enable students and their teachers to build a community where connections between literature and life are made and re-made all the time. Central to the work of my Year 7 in remaking the story of *Beowulf* is dramatic role play where the students become both characters in the narratives they create and storytellers. A significant part of my research focuses on the collaborative nature of learning that is built through talk and how this enables pupils to be both critical and superbly creative in responding to a literary text.

Learning from Literature? Moving beyond the curriculum

Amy Meredith

The first set of students to sit the new GCSE in English had their results last August. In light of this I felt it would be timely to understand what teachers and students had found whilst teaching it and being assessed, especially in my new role as a head of English. It has been seen as one of the most politically driven and politically contested curriculums in thirty years, but I felt it was important to look to the people who had gone through it to find out what the impact has been. What I have found in my research is that regardless of how conservative their teachers may find the curriculum, students' responses cannot be dictated: what they gain, learn, the ideas they explore, the identities they question and assert throughout the process of interacting with these texts is often unexpected and rarely predictable. In order to explore this issue I have interviewed students, garnering their reactions to the new GCSEs, particularly looking at the impact of reading *Jane Eyre*. I also interviewed teachers and have examined the links and contrasts between how students and teachers view the new GCSEs.

Watching *Macbeth*: What are they really learning?

Myfanwy Marshall

The National Theatre's (London) recent touring production of *Macbeth* was designed by their Learning department with the popularity of *Macbeth* as a GCSE text in mind but also with other goals- particularly to bring a National Theatre production to places and young people who otherwise might not have experienced it. Because of the nature of the production and the story of its development, the word 'learning' becomes more problematic. As a participant researcher, who was consulted as a teacher during the development of the production, I am interested in what kind of learning is taking place when we take students to see the production.

This paper looks at examples from schools that participated in the research to explore the question of what the young people felt they learned and what other learning might have occurred in the group conversations sparked in the focus groups. I argue that the value of the experience is not limited to its potential impact on GCSE grades but is far more complex. The paper will consider the importance of the post show focus groups as important opportunities for the development of the students' thoughts and ideas.

The role of drama in learning and development

Nick Bentley

As part of my Masters' degree, I carried out research into the impact of drama on young people's development - as users of language in all its modes and as social beings. I draw on five case study students (year 9) from my so-called 'nurture group' at the diverse all-girls comprehensive in east London where I teach. I consider the drama experiences of the young people involved and I make the case that using drama as a learning medium can benefit all young people. In my presentation I will draw on material from the journal I kept throughout the period of research. I look at examples of the pupils' writing and at the critical reflections undertaken by me and by teaching assistants working with me to support the students involved in the research. I want to suggest that using drama not only enriches reading, writing, oral communication and social learning as distinct entities, but it also and necessarily develops them simultaneously. Finally, I would like to suggest further areas for research in relation to the use of drama in education and to consider the idea that drama is a powerful way 'to get young people's voices heard'.

WORKSHOP 5

The place of subject knowledge in the contemporary English department

Guyan Mitra

This study explores issues concerning the increasing conflict between interested parties around the concept of teacher subject knowledge within the subject of English. What knowledge does an English teacher need? How is this knowledge defined and acquired by a practising English teacher and then utilised in the classroom? These are questions much raised in political and pedagogical discourse. Given the emphasis placed in the current educational climate on knowledge in the curriculum and the subject knowledge held by the teacher, this exploration aims to uncover teacher views on their own subject knowledge in a large inner-London comprehensive via a series of case-study style interviews.

This study unearths English teachers' experiences of the facets around subject knowledge and explores teachers' impressions of the resulting influences on their teaching, discovering that despite attempts to codify and standardise subject knowledge, each individual teacher possesses a unique understanding and level of expertise that greatly influences their practice as a teacher that exists outside the imagined parameters set out by standardising bodies and authorities.

The place of Literature at KS4

Louise Northey

As part of my studies towards my PhD, I have researched students' and teachers' views of the place of Literature at KS4 with regard to the worth of the subject and its identity. Specific areas that I have researched include: an exploration of what texts are taught and how these form part of a secondary school canon; what skills students and teachers perceive to be imparted by the subject; which genres students most enjoy studying and which they believe to be most valuable to study; and, whether students understand the difference between English Language and English Literature.

The paper will focus on some of the key findings of my research so far, specifically in relation to the difference perceptions of the skills that the subject imparts that are held by students and teachers.

Immersion, Engagement, Presence, and Flow

Alison Jane Croasdale

This paper considers the implications of the concepts of *immersion*, *engagement*, *presence*, and *flow* for the classroom practice of teachers of English and literacy. With reference to a completed MA thesis focusing on game design and its ability to feed back into English through different forms of creative writing and visual grammar - *Playable Character: Constitutive Languages and the Creation of Games* (2016) - and a current proposed PhD thesis looking at the National Theatre's 'New Views' project with an emphasis on immersion as a pedagogical strategy, the main consideration is an exploration of what these concepts are, building on the work of Murray (1997), Carr (2006), McMahan (2003), and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) particularly, and how the four related ideas can influence teaching practice regarding the introduction of writing skills to reluctant or 'less able' learners. Case study data pertains to a large Catholic Secondary school in the East of London and reflects the presenter's role as a classroom teacher and Key Stage manager.

Can children's motivation and engagement in literature be encouraged by the use of texts which enable them to explore their identities?

Jade Baker

This study questions whether the Conservative government's attempt to traditionalise the National Curriculum in 2014 by emphasising texts from our "literary heritage" - the English canon - has the wrong emphasis in the context of an inner London primary school with a majority of working class, black and minority ethnic (BME) pupils. As an alternative, it asks whether texts that act as "mirrors", allowing pupils to explore their class and racial identities, are more likely to motivate and engage. It explores whether these kinds of text can reach reluctant readers and transform their attitudes to reading and writing. Using the methodology of action research and the ideas of liberation pedagogy, I analysed the data from a Year 5 group of pupils' responses to texts which represent their identities contrasted with ones that belong to the English canon. The findings suggest that texts which allow space to navigate identity, giving children's everyday experiences value, allow them to become expert literary analysers of these texts and also to encounter those from the English canon with greater confidence.

Responding to writing: a consideration of feedback

Isobel Duncan

The development of writing and the teaching of writing are central issues for all English teachers. This is also highly contested ground. In my presentation I will consider the question of what is meant by 'formative and meaningful feedback to students' about their writing. My interest comes partly from a concern that as a result of the current national agenda and former policies such as the National Literacy Strategy, feedback on writing has become reductive. There is an ever-increasing pressure to meet certain assessment criteria in order to demonstrate an 'improvement in standards' at the expense of agency, control and even enjoyment on the part of students. I consider alternative approaches to feedback, approaches that focus on the idea that students need to *think of themselves as writers* with choices that involve the crafting of language and structure - with a reader in mind. The feedback I consider is both written and oral and comes from teachers, the writers and their peers. The results of my investigation make a strong case for an approach to writing that puts the pupil at the centre of the meaning-making process that should underpin all writing.

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