

The creative sociability of English classrooms and ‘the true nature of stories’¹

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Abstract: In currently dominant accounts, English as a school subject, its content and processes, are construed as an induction into a well-defined, already-established disciplinary discourse or set of discourses. In an attempt to challenge this version of English, I present some examples of autobiographical writing by secondary students and I tell the story of an observed lesson. From these instances of practice, a different picture of English emerges – one where the English classroom might be regarded as a place of literary sociability, where students enter into dialogue with each other and with the literature that they read, and where the complex challenges entailed in any attempt to represent experience in words is properly acknowledged.

My starting point is a statement about the role that writing plays in schooling that might be taken to reflect the currently dominant view of the central purposes of education. The statement is taken from an essay by Frances Christie, who, as one of the most influential proponents of genre theory, has exerted considerable influence on the ways that English has been reconfigured over the past decades in Australia, the UK and other parts of the Anglophone world:

The principal purpose of writing in contemporary societies is to construct, store, disseminate and critique the various disciplines or bodies of knowledge valued in English-speaking traditions and institutions, including, for example, literary studies, science, history, geography, and so on. While initiation into such disciplines begins in the primary years, it is in the secondary years that the challenges of learning the various disciplines or school subjects become most marked. That is because this is the period when the characteristic discourses of the different subjects emerge most distinctively: knowledge construction in science, mathematics, English, history and so on is increasingly expressed in different genres, different ways of reasoning, different ways of handling the ‘uncommonsense’ knowledge that the various disciplines represent. (Christie 2013, p. 18)

I find the statement, and the position it represents, deeply troubling. I am concerned that this theoretical position has led to an unhelpful emphasis on product rather than process, an oversimplification of the formal properties of writing and an obliteration of any sense of young writers’ identities and purposes for writing. The essay that follows is an attempt to draw attention to dimensions of schooling, and of what happens in English in particular, that cannot be accommodated within this model of language and learning. These dimensions merit our notice: they provide the basis for a different rationale for school as a place where young people can draw on the semiotic and relational resources available to them to make sense of their experiences and to engage in meaningful conversations with one another. I should make clear, too, that in what follows I will be drawing on evidence of policy and practice in England.² While I recognise that the experiences on which I focus have local, contingent aspects, I hope that their relevance to colleagues working in schools in Australia will become apparent.

In Frances Christie’s account, the language of schooling is, principally, the language of the disciplines, and it is by learning the language of the disciplines that students gain access to the knowledge that really counts – the knowledge that is powerful precisely because it differs from the experiential knowledge (common sense?) that can be acquired beyond the school gates (cf. Young 2008; Young & Lambert 2014). Christie conceptualises writing as deriving from the disciplines on which school subjects, at least in her account, are based. In the passage quoted

above, she invokes 'literary studies' as one of these disciplines. Quite what she means by this remains unclear, and I am not at all sure that English as a school subject can straightforwardly be derived from the discipline of literary studies: more generally, the question of the knowledge-base of English remains a matter of contestation (McLean Davies & Sawyer 2018). In what follows, I argue that the talk and writing that take place in school serve larger and more complicated purposes than merely the representation of disciplinary knowledge.

In Christie's model of language, there is a sharp separation of everyday and disciplinary (or, in Michael Young's terms, 'powerful') knowledge, and the primary function of schools is reducible to the transmission of (disciplinary) knowledge. As I and others have argued elsewhere, this does not seem to be the case in English, where the most exciting developments happen when students bring their everyday knowledge to bear on the material that they encounter in the classroom, and where their experience of language in the classroom enables them to think more, and differently, about themselves and about the wider world (Turvey et al. 2014; Yandell & Brady 2016; Doecke & Yandell 2018). In what follows, my focus is on the complexity of the writing – and thinking – that is accomplished when students are given the opportunity to use the semiotic resources available to them to grapple with and represent their own experiences.

Students' stories and teachers' responses (and responsibilities)

To explore these complexities, let's start with a piece written by a secondary school student in an English GCSE examination, the high-stakes test taken by 16-year-olds in England:

My Dad

My dad was a shopping arcade owner but he became a bad gambler he would bet on anything from maggot races to football that was when he went bust so every morning, afternoon and night he would go back to the demolition site where his shopping arcade [had been] and draw and paint pictures of the shopping arcade been demolished he would be their for 4 or 5 hours a time just sat their winging to himself wondering what to do next we have got pictures all over the house of the shopping arcade from beighn up and running to been flat on the ground from every angle possible. He is able to sell a lot of them to make money back that he has to pay back to the distributors our house has never beighn the same since you could cut the atmosphere with a knife, my dad has beighn offered a new job as the manager of a new shopping arcade he said he will think about it but knowone in the right mind wants my dad as their manager and noone would believe that he is going to take it. It would be to much pressure for him he would collapse, have a nervous breakdown. He would not survive a week let alone five years which would be the minimum contract aloued for such an important job (QCA 1999b, p. 26)

I suspect that most teachers of English have experienced moments such as, I think, is represented by this text, when a student uses the constraints – and possibly also the strange anonymity – of an examination paper to explore something that matters to them – something of such intense personal significance as to transcend the immediate circumstances of the test. If we can read 'My Dad' without becoming distracted by the surface imperfections of the text, by the writer's difficulties with orthography and punctuation, we might want to acknowledge what has been achieved here. The writer has confronted the problem of how to represent to others a story which is both painful and unfinalisable, a story which is about another human being while at the same time being about the teller and their relationship to this other human being. And, for he writer, telling the story seems to provide a means of thinking through what it might mean, of

coming to terms with another person whose own misfortunes (or demons) have exerted such a powerful influence on their own life.

This apparently unassuming text is actually structured in very complex ways. There is nothing straightforward about the people and experiences that are represented here, and there is certainly nothing straightforward about what is involved in the act of representation. Experience is mediated linguistically in ways that might be categorised as literary. Take, for example, the ways in which time is represented: time as chronological, objective, public time, but also psychological time, time as a dimension of lived human experience, time as recursive, evoked in and through acts of memory.

This, at any rate, might be one way of responding to the story that is being told. It was not, however, how 'My Dad' was presented when it appeared in a government-sponsored publication, *Improving Writing at key stages 3 and 4* (QCA 1999), produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the body responsible for the oversight of the National Curriculum and of centrally-regulated regimes of assessment in England. There, it was intended to exemplify the weaknesses of writing characteristic of students who were awarded a grade F. Below is part of the commentary on 'My Dad' that was offered in this booklet:

Textual organisation

- Opening: The main character (dad) is very clearly established, as is the theme/narrative problem (consequences of dad's gambling). But the time-scale is not clear and remains a weakness of the narrative throughout.
- Ending: This remains congruent with the growing theme, and there are hints of future developments. However, though there is some sense of closure, it finishes on a banal technicality about the legal terms of a contract.
- Coherence/cohesion: ... the noun phrase (my dad) is used only three times and there is a consequent overuse of *he/his*, but with only one character, this is less damaging to cohesion than it otherwise might be.
- Reader-writer relationship: The choice of lexis is arguably too informal in the opening. An A grade writer might lend distance and formality by using *father* instead of *my dad* and *bad* is not a strong adjective to describe a gambler in this context. ... The reader is positioned to be critical of the father by ironic repetition and contrast. But the main problem is a lack of detail and excess of pace there is so much more that the reader wants to know.

(QCA 1999b, p. 28)

I offer the commentary here as an object lesson in how not to respond to the stories that students tell. It is an approach which starts from a template, a set of preconceived notions of what a text should look like, how it should be organized, what register of language should be adopted, and judges what the student has actually written on the basis of its divergence from this model. What it signally fails to do is to consider the writer's purposes or what the writer might be accomplishing in this piece. If this were merely a chronological account, chronicling stages in the economic and psychological decline of a man with a gambling addiction, the strictures about timescale might have some justification. But it isn't – it involves the representation of the writer's relationship with this person, their sense of them across time and the vicissitudes of the family's experiences. Likewise, the suggestion that greater formality of lexical choices would be desirable seems spectacularly to miss the point – and the force – of the student's decision to write about their *dad*. When, in the final sentence, there is a shift into a more public, formal register, this is dismissed as the introduction of a banal technicality. Again, this marks a colossal failure in imagination and empathy: from the protected viewpoint of the commentator, the length of a contract of

employment might appear thus; from the perspective of all those, including the writer, whose material circumstances force them to confront the real effects of precarity, such matters are very far from technicalities. They are banal only insofar as the everyday struggle for existence is banal.

I present this example of institutionalised misreading because, in this era of standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond 2004), its recommended method of responding to the stories that students tell has become perilously close to plain common sense. The government-approved document in which it appeared was part of a larger research project, looking at the ways in which English teachers' impressionistic judgements of the quality of their students' writing might be mapped onto discrete, objective and fairly easily quantifiable variations of lexis and textual organization that could be identified in a large sample of student writing (QCA 1999a). In itself, this analysis might be regarded as providing evidence that experienced teachers' judgements were grounded in what Bethan Marshall (2011), following Royce Sadler, has characterized as a form of guild knowledge. But the effect of the Technical Accuracy Project (QCA 1999a) was much more profound – and much more damaging to writing pedagogy – than this might indicate. What happened next was that the analytic categories of the research project (lexical choices, sentence lengths, markers of textual cohesion and coherence, and so on) were then transformed into pedagogic categories – the individual features of written text that were to be taught, explicitly and as markers of effective writing. It is an approach which has had profoundly damaging effects in English schools in the past two decades (Barrs 2019). And it is an approach which, sadly, has been replicated across much of the Anglophone world (see, for example, Petrosky & Mihalakis 2016; Doecke & Breen 2013).

What I have tried to suggest is not only that it has promoted 'bad writing' (though I fear that that has been its bitter harvest); it is also that, in itself, it enacts a symbolic violence against our students. That, it seems to me, is precisely what is happening in the commentary on 'My Dad', where the complexity of the work is ignored and where the prescriptions that are applied to it, in the most cloth-eared fashion, amount to the imposition of a set of class prejudices. (Is it vulgar to talk about contracts of employment? Is the education of gentlemen our primary concern?)

Within the domain of schooling, neoliberal systems and processes operate to deny difference, individuality, agency, to reduce all work to what is easily measurable and quantifiable, to treat processes of education as if they could adequately be represented by cells on a spreadsheet (Turvey et al. 2014; Unwin & Yandell 2016; Doecke & Yandell 2020; Yandell et al. 2020). The treatment of 'My Dad' provides an instance of these processes at work, of the misrecognition that is involved in so reductive an approach to a student's act of meaning-making. The same processes also operate to misrepresent what happens in English lessons, to reduce to some imaginary one-way transmission of knowledge the complex, multifaceted and unpredictable interactions through which learning happens.

The story of a lesson

We have seen that what might superficially appear to be a very simple text in fact involves complex work both with respect to the organization of time within the narrative and the construction of the narrator, not to mention other dimensions. The stories that students bring into class can never be dismissed as 'just experience' – they always involve a complex rendering of experience for other audiences, complex relations between the storytelling and the audience of the text. This has come home to me repeatedly in the work that I do as a teacher educator. To

illustrate this, I want to tell the story of a lesson. Before I do, though, I want to say why I think such stories are vitally important. My interest is in the stories that our students encounter, in written or other forms, and in the stories that they tell and how we might respond to them. But I am equally interested in the stories that we tell as teachers, and why these stories are valuable and should be attended to.

The work that stories do, and how they do it, is not reducible to the sterile categories of genre that characterize Christie's approach to language and learning. Stories tend to particularize things. They recognize, too, the perspectival. I have been reading the latest collection by Kei Miller (2019), *in nearby bushes*. He has these lines, in a poem called 'The Understory':

Whoever did tell you there was two sides
to every story is someone who don't know the true
nature of stories. Try two hundred, or two thousand ...
(Miller 2019, p. 8)

And nowhere is this multiplicity, this multidimensionality, more apparent than in relation to classroom stories, and stories of classrooms.

So, when I tell you the story of a lesson, it is, in a very limited sense, my story, in that I am the one telling it and in that I am, necessarily, telling it from my perspective. But I recognize that there would be other ways of telling it, other perspectives from which it might be told. It isn't - and it cannot be - either definitive or objective. In his essay, "The storyteller", Walter Benjamin (1955/1970) insists on the importance of the role of the listeners: it is they who must determine what the story means (cf. Pereira & Doecke 2016).

It is a lesson that I was privileged to observe earlier this year, in a boys' comprehensive school in inner London. It's a school with a diverse student population, diverse ethnically and in class terms. The lesson was taught collaboratively by Sarah³, my student teacher (that is, a student on the preservice teacher education programme on which I work) and by her mentor, Amy, a teacher with over twenty years' experience of working in inner London schools. The lesson was located in a unit of work on autobiography. In the previous lesson, the students, a class of 11- and 12-year-olds, had been given a choice of two homework tasks: they were either to choose an artefact that meant something to them and bring it in to school, prepared to talk about it, or they were to interview an older family member.

Rather unusually – no, more than that, quite remarkably - the majority of the class seemed to have chosen to do both. If this surprised me, what really intrigued me were the artefacts they had brought with them. In a class of about twenty-five boys, at least six or seven were clutching teddy bears (if you accept that as a quite capacious term for a variety of more or less ursine, more or less anthropomorphized, cuddly toys). And they had stories to tell.

Charlie presents his first shoes. He explains that he never used to like wearing shoes or socks – and he came to like these ones because of the colour (they are bright red). Will presents a painting he had done, as a very young child – a representation of his anger. 'It's very abstract,' comments Raphael. Rubel likes the textures on the right of the image. Edmir talks about his teddy – 'like Spiderman, but a plushier version'. Deodan has also brought in a teddy bear – linked to his diagnosis of diabetes, in that the bear was given to him after a visit to the hospital. He becomes very emotional, and Amy comforts him. Artan, who is sitting next to me, presents his first bear,

which he made himself when he was about five. He explains that he was taken by his big sisters to a 'build a bear' workshop. He says the bear reminds him of the longevity of his relationship with his sisters.

'Was that [the bear-making trip with his sisters] before you came to this country?' asks another student. Initially, I misconstrue the force of this question. In the wider political context of the 'hostile environment' for immigrants that has been deliberately fostered by recent UK governments, it is easy to assume that any such reference to a student's migrant status is intended as a slur, a questioning of their right to be here, or to participate in the conversation. But, as the lesson proceeds, I realize that I have misunderstood. Artan and his interlocutor have known each other for years. They, like many of the boys in the class, had attended the same primary school. There is a shared history here that informs much of the sharing of artefacts and memories. What is impressive, I gradually realize, is the quality of attention from the other students – as when they are listening to Adam's story of the box.

Cormac comments on this – the value of the box as a repository of objects that have meaning for Adam. Ali shares his mother's memories: she has told him one story about playing cricket at Lord's, and another about a British National Party (neo-fascist) march that took place outside the flats in Tower Hamlets where she grew up. Amy invites Michael to share the message in the book he has brought in – a message from his former teachers. Rubel talks about the school photographs he has brought in – from Year 3, with his brothers. Josh presents his scrapbook from nursery. My observation notes, below, are addressed to Sarah, my student teacher:

What has been going on for the past twenty minutes has been extraordinary, hasn't it? The students have been wonderful, both in sharing and in receiving these memories. There have been glimpses, too, of shared histories – of several students recognising the teachers who wrote the message in Michael's book, the student whose question to Artan revealed a prior knowledge of his Bosnian heritage, and so on. What is happening here is a significant moment in the development of the class's identity as a class, and in their sense of what subject English might mean to them – as a space in which all sorts of private and public experiences can be shared, relished, worked on and considered.

There is also something to be said here about the complexity of the rendering of time in these shared memories. There is, generally, a concern to locate the memory in chronological time: this was when I was in Year 3, or when I was 4, and so on. But alongside this there is also a sense of memory operating across time, of memory being (re-)constituted in the stories that are told and retold, and of the distance between the teller and the memory: this is what life was like then, and what I was like then, and this is how I am now In this – really rather important – sense, the timeline might be somewhat of a distraction, an oversimplification, since it appears to fix the memory at a point in time, without acknowledging the ways in which the memory functions as a bridge across time and as a resource for the ongoing work of identity (re-)making.

(From my lesson observation notes, 17 January 2019)

This story of the lesson is significant because it involves attending to processes, not just products, because it renders visible those dimensions of education that are effaced by the neoliberal, discourse of spreadsheets and rubrics. It is not possible to tell this story without recognising that what happens in the classroom is socially enacted, enacted in history and culture – the diverse histories and cultures of the participants. This is where teachers' and students' work gets done. And the claim that I am making is that such work demands recognition, in three different senses of the word. First, what I have described is, with local variation, familiar to anyone who has spent time in English lessons. Its surprises are the everyday surprises of school life. Second, that such

work, which draws on, and arises out of, the students' sense of themselves and of the challenges of representing their own histories, their own formation as social beings, needs to be understood as intrinsically valuable. And third, that it obliges us to involve ourselves in re-cognition, in thinking again about what is happening in such moments:

... we are positing 'creativity' as being potentially a function of those institutional settings and the social relationships enacted there, rather than treating it as a dimension of human experience that exists outside the school walls, even as we affirm the potential of the students' creativity to challenge the conventional practices and assumptions that obtain in those settings.
... our intention here is to do no more than try to capture the sociability that formed a necessary context for them to create their texts and to learn from each other ...
(Doecke & McClenaghan 2011, p. 77)

Memory, writing and the social

The creative sociability, or sociable creativity, captured by Doecke and McClenaghan, was also salient in the writing that Amy's students produced in the course of their work on autobiography. Recalling Ian Reid's (1984) gallery/workshop binary. I think it is helpful to see Amy's classroom as a workshop, in that this aptly characterizes the writerly approach to literary texts that was evident in the pieces they wrote – a body of work which reveals how their reading and writing had been brought into close and productive dialogue, one with the other (cf. Barthes 1973/1990; Barrs & Cork 2001).

Also relevant here are two strands of Reid's argument about the development of writing. First, questioning the assumption that 'children's writing should always aim to record the authentic contours of a personal experience' (Reid 1984, p. 27), he insists on the validity of a more playful and inventive approach to the rendering of experience in words, 'perhaps using a half borrowed, self consciously "literary" language to bring into being something not felt or known until uttered' (ibid.). Second, he emphasizes the social nature of the workshop:

... its insistence that most learning occurs not as a private, interior experience but as an *interactive* one, socially shaped. Knowledge, in the Workshop, is less a personal acquisition than an interpersonal production: relational, collaborative, and more specifically a matter of exchange.
(Reid 1984, p. 3)

The literary text, for Amy's students, becomes a resource for textual production, to be sure, but much more than this: it is a resource for making meaning, for recognition. What I mean by this is a process of seeing something familiar, but also of thinking again, and of attributing value or significance to the thing observed.

My special thing is my small Arsenal shirt because I have had it since I was 4. I loved the shirt and wore it everywhere. I remember in reception/year 1 I really wanted to wear the shirt but it was way too small.
... To some people, it might seem like a piece of clothing, but to me it's a memory I love so much and see differently from others. My uncle bought it for me ... (Kadir)⁴

For some of Amy's students, the extract from Pepys' diary, his account of the fire of London (Pepys 1666), provided a model for their own diaries in which there is a Pepysian oscillation between the

immediate and domestic, on the one hand, and, on the other, larger social matters. Here is a fragment from Edmir's diary that does precisely this:

Wednesday

I came back from school tired. As I was about to open the door, I heard my dad cheering. He later tells me that Kosovo are finally having their own army, which is really good, because when Serbia try to come at us again we are prepared.

Thursday

It was after dinner when I started running up the stairs and I booted up my PS4 and played *Resident Evil 2*. ...

The claim that I am making here about what Pepys does for Edmir is that it expands Edmir's sense of what is sayable, thereby enabling him to represent his experience as encompassing both the local (coming home to play on his PS4) and the political (his Kosovar heritage and his family's investment in this).

The text that seemed to achieve most in offering Amy's students a different set of potentials for meaning-making, or a different way of thinking about experience, was Ian Whitwham's (2017) "The Fish and Chip Club." In this memoir, Whitwham recalls his final year at primary school, in the 1950s. It is a wonderfully evocative piece, in which the intense emotions of childhood friendships are enacted against the looming shadow of the 11-plus exam, the mechanism for sorting 11-year-olds into different kinds of school, and hence allocating different futures (cf. Yandell 2020).

What Amy's students take from it, however, is Whitwham's rendering, through dialogue and a first-person narrative in which attention is paid to the vivid particularities of sense data, of the sociality of childhood. Whitwham's piece provides them with resources to rework in their own representations of primary school experience.

It's a Friday afternoon, the lunchtime of a summer in year four. I'm with my best friends – Kai, Shayan, Hamzah and a couple of year sixes, just standing there. We all have our packed lunches in our hands. We are sitting down eating, and Hamzah offers me one of his Actimel drinks. I take it in pleasure.

I'm in my awesome, stripy t-shirt and my favourite blue shorts that say 'Malibu Beach' on them. The sun is out so I'm as cheerful as Santa on Christmas. "Ah, I would kill to be in Hawaii right now!" screams Hamzah.

We all chime in with "me too"s. We sit there dreaming of this spectacular beach fun holiday when a ball hits my face.

"So, Artan, are we going to play basketball or what?" shouts Kai, taking my Actimel.

He's drinking MY Actimel and I just sit there. (Artan)

We met on Monday, on the bus in front of the school gates. The sky a teal blue and beams of light shine on us as we chat on the back row seats. Anthony, Michael (or Mike for short), Maisie and a few other friends, waiting for one week of rest, away from our parents. It is the summer of 2018, around the end of June. We're all around 11.

We are laughing hysterically, thinking about our pasts.

"Yo, remember when Anthony had a crush on the TA?" Mike laughs, trying to get the words out.

Everyone on the bus goes silent. I start to cackle, and after a while everyone does too, except Mike who is fully red in the face.

"Ha ha," Michael replies sarcastically. "Says the guy who cried after being rejected."

Before anyone can reply, the bus starts. (Raheem)

These autobiographical narratives differ markedly from the “My dad” piece. There is an interior dimension, a focus on affect, but these memories are irreducibly social. Things happen in the social, and the social is where identities are formed, challenged, reframed. These are also, interestingly, not elegiac in tone, at least not in the way that Ian Whitwham's piece so poignantly is. But what they also take from Whitwham is a sense of the ways in which experience can be played with, shaped as it is transformed into the stuff of narrative. This is not quite what Reid had in mind, I think, in his defence of the fictive artifice, and yet there is an important sense in which Artan and Raheem are bringing into being something which becomes differently known, differently meaningful, as it is formed in the act of writing.

What Amy's students have been doing, the stories that they have been telling, reading and writing, might make us want to think again about the disciplinary foundations of subject English. Their work is not reducible to the abstract models of writing provided by Christie and other genre theorists, nor could it be categorized as the ‘literary studies’ that Christie invokes as a body of knowledge. And yet I am struck by the way that Amy's unit of work on autobiography is structured around a series of encounters with texts that might be regarded as literary: extracts from Roald Dahl (1986) and William Woodruff (2002) as well as Pepys and Whitwham. Her students' own writing is produced in dialogue with these writers as well as in dialogue with one another. The literariness of the work that they produce, its playfulness as well as its often remarkably assured sense of form and of audience, seem to me to be enabling conditions of their writing. In Amy's classroom, the students are taken seriously as human beings, each with their own history, and taken seriously as writers, engaged in the same struggle as any published author – the struggle to render experience in language.

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¹ A version of this paper was given as a keynote address at the AATE Conference, Deakin University, Melbourne, 1st December, 2019. My title is a quotation from Kei Miller (2019, p. 8).

² In what follows, I focus on policy and practice in state schools in England. In each of the other countries of the United Kingdom, the relationship between government policy and curriculum has been a somewhat different one. For an account of these differences, see Jones (2015).

³ Teachers' and students' names have been pseudonymized.

⁴ My thanks to Amy and her students for sharing these pieces of writing with me.