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# Responding to a cry in the wilderness: teachers' perceptions of teaching the Apprentice of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and its impact on the signature pedagogies of English

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# Responding to a cry in the wilderness: teachers' perceptions of teaching the Apprentice of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and its impact on the signature pedagogies of English

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings from a small-scale study conducted over the first two years of a novel post-16 qualification, the Apprentice of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (AFA). It foregrounds the voices of English teachers teaching the AFA, to explore whether and how the AFA contributes to developing subject English's 'signature pedagogies' (p. 3), promoting teacher agency, creativity and dialogue. Research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with five teachers across four schools over two years, analysed through a hermeneutic framing. Findings suggest that the participants perceived that teaching the qualification had a positive impact on their professional agency, enhanced their relationships with students, and resulted in greater job satisfaction. In a policy context where secondary English teaching in England is increasingly restricted, threatening both the signature pedagogies and teacher supply, the paper calls for larger-scale longitudinal research into initiatives such as the AFA and the affordances they offer.

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Apprentice of Fine Arts in Creative Writing; subject English; teacher retention; agency; professional development; signature pedagogies

## Introduction and overview

Drawing on a plumbing analogy proffered by the philosopher Mary Midgley, Professor Robert Eaglestone (2021) suggests that there is something seriously awry in the secondary English curriculum. He argues that notions of the 'knowledge' necessary for success in English – particularly the complex knowledge needed fully to appreciate literature – have become so distorted that the very foundations of the subject are vulnerable. 'Knowledge' in many English classrooms is too often reduced to 'factoids' (Eaglestone, 2021, p. 28) to be memorised for GCSE<sup>1</sup> examinations. This has a very real impact upon teachers, their students and English itself. The number of entries for Advanced Level (A Level) English Literature recently plunged, falling out of the top 10 for the first time (Garcia et al., 2022), arguably due to uninspiring GCSE lessons 'sucking the joy' from the subject (Weale, 2019, n.p.).

It is arguably not the teachers' fault that the subject and their pedagogy is thus diminished. Eaglestone would agree that, as 'principal operatives in the system' and 'a permanent source of

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knowledge and expertise' (Winch, 2012, p. 309), teachers *should* be entrusted to act in the best interests of their students and their discipline. However, the pressures of the National Curriculum, school league tables and Ofsted<sup>2</sup> inspections have mired teachers in 'curricularisation' (Kress et al., 2004, p. 152). The content they are required to deliver is increasingly centralised; commercial packages are purchased by some schools to ensure curriculum consistency. There is concern (see NATE, 2022) that Ofsted's *Research Review: English* (2022) may exacerbate this trend, while the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019) is likely to reduce English teachers' critical and creative curriculum choices further (Oxford, 2021). Denied agency, many teachers experience a 'learned helplessness' (Erss, 2018, p. 243.) which leads to deprofessionalisation (Biesta et al., 2015; Smith, 2018). Agency is not about what people *have*, or even *know*; it is what they *do*; it is shaped by 'a configuration of influences from the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998 in Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626). Yet if the past is restricted through limited experience, and future goals are limited to what is merely measurable, teachers' meaningful and dynamic engagement with the present is also curtailed. Eaglestone favours an approach to English that develops teachers' agentic disciplinary thinking: those *involved* in teaching English should be, collectively and collaboratively, those *forming* it and *developing* it through what he terms 'signature pedagogies' (Eaglestone 2021, p. 3): dialogic, exploratory and creative approaches.

This paper first discusses the restrictions on English teachers' agency and the concomitant narrowing of the signature pedagogies of English, then reports the findings of a small-scale study exploring teachers' perceptions of leading a new qualification designed for post-16 students, *The Apprentice of Fine Arts in Creative Writing* (AFA). Although the AFA was not developed in direct response to the challenges described, the research presents the voices of five English teachers as they navigate and go some way to solving them. Together, the participants demonstrate that teaching the AFA changed their relationships with their role, their students and their subject, and had an impact across their departments. This suggests that the AFA and similar initiatives that promote teacher agency, creativity and dialogic pedagogies offer an alternative to the skills-based epistemological framing of the English pedagogy criticised by Eaglestone, enabling a more ontological, aesthetic, embodied classroom experience. The paper calls for further research into such initiatives to support secondary English now and into the future.

### ***The problem – 'You can't do English by yourself' (Eaglestone, 2021, p. 12)***

Secondary English policy today (DfE, 2014, 2019; Ofsted, 2022) is very different to policy past. The earliest official curriculum guidance saw English as a humane discipline grounded in the appreciation of oral and written language, both canonical and contemporary, and in the creation of the new (Board of Education, 1905/1912). This view can be traced through almost nine decades of official policy (including Bullock, 1975; Newbolt, 1921/1934; Plowden, 1967), up to and including the first National Curriculum (Cox, 1989). Together, these documents moulded what Eaglestone defines as the signature pedagogies of English: reliant on rich, exploratory talk, expansive reading and the encouragement of genuine communication through writing (Smith, 2019). These pedagogies, adapted by teachers according to the needs and interests of their students, are reflected in the two

prime ‘knowledges’ Eaglestone identifies as central to English: *techne* (the craft, or *doing*; *how* to speak, listen, read and write effectively) and *phronesis* (the wisdom and judgement gained through discussion, deliberation, thought) (2021, p.10).

In contrast, a National Curriculum (hereafter ‘the Curriculum’) by its very nature advocates a ‘planned enculturation’ (Biesta & Osberg, 2008, p. 316) that limits a teacher’s autonomy (Ball et al., 2012; Heilbronn, 2013; Smit, 2005). The second iteration of the Curriculum for English (DfE, 1995) began a trend that ultimately led to the dominance of grammar, accuracy and expository writing in the current (sixth) iteration (DfE, 2013) and the removal of all references to ‘creativity’ (Smith, 2023). This trend has increasingly narrowed opportunities for humane, dialogic English (Bomford, 2018; Gibbons, 2019; Goodwyn, 2016) and thus exacerbated the erosion of teacher agency.

Nevertheless, Eaglestone suggests that it is not the *content* of today’s Curriculum which is antithetic to the development of the signature pedagogies, given its requirement for cultural, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual development (DfE, 2013 in 2021, p. 11); rather, he blames the accountability culture in which it is couched. The pressure for examination success has reduced many secondary school English lessons to limited exercises in PEE or PETAL,<sup>3</sup> the objective being to produce a series of quasi-manufactured paragraphs that meet examination criteria rather than demonstrate understanding of the text or topic concerned (Gibbons, 2019). ‘Creative writing’ - traditionally providing opportunities for personal, imaginative and artistic development - nominally survives, but as an important element of the GCSE, it has been re-invented as a sub-genre in many schools (500 words of prose, written in response to a prompt, in timed conditions), precluding opportunities for real originality or aesthetic exploration (Smith, 2023)). Hence, Brindley (2015) argues that English is stymied by a ‘knowledge dichotomy’ (2015, p. 46), wherein the type of knowledge decided by ‘policy committees’ (*ibid.*), measurable and accountable (the formal ‘knowledge’ of the Curriculum) sits uneasily alongside the knowledge borne of ‘self-reflexivity’ (*ibid.*) - personal growth. She sees the two as equally valid but in competition, creating a ‘conundrum’ (2015, p. 47) for English teachers who are required by the Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2011) to teach both, a point compounded by the Curriculum’s use of a modal verb to define what English teachers ‘should’ do (DfE, 2013).

Accordingly, teachers are ‘living with contradiction’ (Heilbronn, 2013, p. 35), confronted by academic and professional advice that is incompatible with Curriculum policy, and even openly hostile towards it (Gibbons, 2019; Yandell & Brady, 2016). This ‘mismatch’ (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 624) risks causing individuals’ practice to suffer; a dominant policy not only de-professionalises teachers, narrowing their beliefs and values, but compromises their agency.

The suppressing of teacher agency is damaging personally as well as professionally. Once the creative, individual elements of an English teacher’s role are lost, many - positioned as experts but feeling like ‘technicians’ (Winch, 2012, p. 324) - report feeling mere ‘cogs’ (Thomas, 2019, p. 50.) in the academic machine (Bomford, 2018), ‘stifled’ by the accountability agenda (Perryman & Calvert, 2020, p. 16). Some choose to leave.<sup>4</sup> If they stay, those weaned in schools where accountability is all-dominant have narrower conceptions of the subject and low opinions of their own capabilities (Cremin & Oliver, 2017). Thus, although incoming professionals are increasingly critical (in the reflective and reflexive sense) of both policy and their own practice (Morgan, 2014), the new

generation of English teachers have little experience of curriculum innovation or contributing to the ongoing development of signature pedagogies, of how to *make* English rather than *take* it (Bleiman, 2020). Furthermore, those acclimatised to tightly regulated, prescriptive curricula have ‘problems of transition’ (Erss, 2018, n.p.) when they move into a more agentic mode. It is what one group of teachers are *doing* and *making* through the AFA qualification, and their reflections on their experiences, that is the focus of this paper.

***‘The knowledge is in and arises from. . . experience’ (Eaglestone, 2021, p. 16): introducing the AFA and the research question***

As its title implies, the AFA is explicitly concerned with creative writing. However, I am interested in how the course might support the signature pedagogies of English more broadly.

Introduced in 2017 by a consortium led by a Head of English, the AFA was developed to replace the A Level in Creative Writing (ALCW) withdrawn by the Department for Education in 2015, allegedly as insufficiently academic (Gibbons, 2017; Morgan, 2014). The AFA course (see Table 1) is designed to be taught through critical workshops: writers share their work-in-progress, giving and receiving feedback. Each writer is silent when their own work is under discussion until asked to respond but, unlike some writing workshop models that rely on ‘gagging’ the author and fault-finding, which have been found sometimes counter-productive (Kearns, 2009), the emphasis in the AFA model is on positive reinforcement and constructive criticism. The teachers participate in these workshops, leading yet alongside, positioned not as expert specialists delivering knowledge, but as learners too (Gilbert, 2021). Indeed, not all AFA teachers consider themselves as established creative writers when they begin. Whilst guidance to prepare them for the role is provided in the AFA specification, and ideas are shared with other teachers at AFA meetings (writersexaminationboard.com), essentially they develop through doing. Given that creative writing tutors in universities *are* usually specialist, established writers, the AFA approach is demonstrably more democratic: it is a model close to the signature pedagogy Eaglestone describes, where ‘a firm distinction between the novice and the expert does not exist’ (2021, p. 29). The non-linear nature of the AFA also enables broader opportunities for writing development.<sup>5</sup>

Although recognised by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the AFA does not yet command the tariff points that contribute to university entrance, so maintained schools receive no central funding, and funding in independent schools is at the discretion of the Headteacher. This has a substantial impact on timetabling – as shown in Table 2 – resulting in the course usually being taught, either in whole or in part, in teachers’ own time.

**Table 1.** A summary of the AFA specification.

AFA (WEB, 2019)	1: Coursework Portfolio 2: Commissioned Writing 3: Responsive Writing	1) Creative writing in three forms (2000 words) plus commentary (1000 words) and ii) writing in student’s choice of specialism (3000 words) plus commentary (1500 words): 60% of grade 2) Two-hour examination – produce two commissioned pieces: 15% of grade 3) Three-hour examination – creative response and commentary to pre-released text of choice: 25% of grade
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**Table 2.** Details of participant schools and teachers<sup>7</sup> (N.B. designed to be presented in landscape format).

School	School type, location, inspection grade at time of interview	Teacher and role at time of interview	Writing history	Cohort size (Y12) students recruited 2017, 2018, 2019	Course structure in Year 1 and Year 2	Additional information	AFA results in first qualification cycle (2019) where known <sup>8</sup>	Interview round participation
Brianwood	Independent selective girls boarding; South West; ISI Compliant (2018)	Fiona <i>Head of English (HoE)</i>	No prior experience	2017: 8 2018: 4 2019: 5 + 2?	Y1: twilight, two hours/week timetabled, plus one hour extra-curricular Y2: Two hours/week in main timetable, plus one hour	Fiona taught first cohort in Yrs 1 and 2 Lou started teaching AFA to new cohort starting in Y2		1, 2, 3, 4
Campion	Maintained mixed comprehensive; South West; Ofsted Outstanding (2011)	Julia <i>HoE (Y1); Director of Teaching, Learning, Literacy and English (Y2)</i>	Extensive: e.g. her writing has featured on Radio 4, and was published in journals when lived in US. Had taught ALCW for one year.	2017: 14 (mixed Y11–Y12) Plus parent group of 12–14	Y1 and 2: twilight, with occasional intensive all-day writing workshops (e.g. willow artist & storytelling). Plus: NaNoWriMo; Misery Tour; entered local literary festival competition	Two-year rotation planned, with Y11 and Y12 students studying together.	Five × student candidates: A, B, B, B, D (Plus eight × parent group candidates: A*, A*, A, A, B, B, B, D; in addition, both teachers also sat the exam, gaining A*, A ×.)	1, 2, 3, 4
Eyebright	Maintained girls comprehensive; South East; Ofsted Outstanding (2012)	D <i>HoE</i>	Some writing experience, e.g. had taken CW module at university, but no opportunity to develop this. Had taught ALCW since 2014	2017: 2		AFA taught by mainscale colleague with English & CW degree		1
Rowan	Independent selective girls' day; South West; ISI Compliant (2017)	Cate <i>HoE</i>		2017: 2 2018: 0 2019: 6 (4 × Y12s and 2 × Y13s) 2020: 3	Y1: Three × hours/fortnight with one member of staff; Y2: Four × hrs/fortnight with two		Two × candidates: A*, A	1, 2, 3, 4



I was invited to evaluate the AFA with a view to presenting a case to UCAS for its validation. I saw the opportunity simultaneously to examine the impact that working with this novel qualification had on the English teachers involved. The aim of the research reported in this paper became to understand teachers' views on their experiences teaching the AFA, and whether and how it might support the signature pedagogies of English.

## Methodology

Four schools (two maintained, two independent) were identified for the study, drawn from a cross-section of the 12 schools involved in the first iteration of the AFA and not including the originator school (see Table 2). While the sample size is small, it is congruent with the limited population, representing a third. I attended an early meeting of AFA teachers to explain the project and invite participants; from those who volunteered, sampling was purposive, based both on geographical convenience and the need to include maintained schools, since 'curricularisation' (*op cit.*) arguably impacts maintained more than independent schools. The maintained schools – both Ofsted 'Outstanding' at the time of the research – were the only two such schools taking on the AFA, perhaps itself an indication of the limitations of the Curriculum to which they are bound and from which fee-paying schools are, by definition, 'independent'. The maintained schools were named after British native flowers (Campion, Eyebright) and the independent schools after British native shrubs (Briarwood, Rowan).

As a hermeneutist – a paradigm neatly summarised by Eaglestone as 'the way that the big picture helps us see the detail, and the detail helps us compose the big picture' (2021, p. 20) – I have been influenced by Philip Gardner (2010, 2011), who uses interviewing to investigate what Eaglestone would term the 'signature pedagogies' of History teachers. As well as being an efficient means of data collection involving people (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Punch, 2009), interviewing is especially appropriate for a project on English pedagogy: English and interviewing share a semantic field: both are associated with 'craft' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 81) and 'culture' in its sociological and artistic senses. Interviewing also offered the opportunity to gather teachers' past professional experiences, engagement with the present and orientations towards the future (seen by Biesta et al. (2015) as fundamental to developing agency) whilst simultaneously enabling them to *develop* those ideas: 'we learn what we think not by computing but by discussing, with others and with ourselves' (Eaglestone, 2021, p. 36). While interviewees' words may be 'imperfect, contestable' (Gardner, 2010, p. 6), a hermeneutic positioning accepts that their collective voices, like tiles in a mosaic, combine to represent a picture of 'truth' (*ibid.*), sufficiently reliable for conclusions to be drawn.

I planned to interview the lead AFA teacher from each school. In the event, change of staffing at Eyebright meant that they dropped out of the project (although not the AFA) after the first interview, while a second teacher at Briarwood requested joining the project. Thus, the discussion below references five participants. All were experienced teachers: they were thus familiar with the challenges in subject English – the theme was already in play in their professional lives (Kinsella, 2006). All gave their time voluntarily and were unpaid. This paper is therefore a result of the commitments and interests of those involved (including mine), although this does not make them acritical respondents.



My own position was that of ‘insider/outsider’ (Trainor, 2013, p. 130): as the leader of an English Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme I was ‘nested in [the teachers’] context’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27). I developed an increasing rapport with all five as the project unfolded, but was conscious to remain vigilant when analysing the data to retain subjectivity (Silverman, 2013).

Interviews took place in the schools at a time of the teachers’ choosing on four occasions over the two-year cycle, at roughly six-monthly intervals (November/December 2017; June/July 2018; November/December 2018; June/July 2019), with the final interview coinciding with the first award of the qualification. Semi-structured questions were used as a supple and inductive method: participants were variously invited to explain the practicalities of establishing and running the AFA in their school, describe a recent AFA workshop, discuss their own development as a writer, comment on what they saw as the affordances and limitations of the award, and explain whether and why they would recommend the qualification to other centres. Responses from one interview round partially informed the next. This cycle enabled the collection of sufficiently ‘thick’ (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004, p. 105) data, allowing for meaning to be constructed and the findings valid and trustworthy. The interviews, each lasting 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed by me, then analysed using a hermeneutic three-tier approach (Kinsella & Bidinosti, 2016): i) holistic (reading for a sense of a whole); ii) selective (identifying important parts, around which the themes coalesced) and iii) detailed (identification of meaningful words and phrases). The participants and all AFA schools were invited to read a draft of this paper and offer critical commentary on two occasions: first at an AFA meeting held midway through the project, and again at the end. All interviewees were further invited to comment on the resulting second draft. Throughout I adhered to BERA guidelines (2018).

In the presentation and discussion of the findings below, as befitting qualitative research, I acknowledge the limitations of the sample, but nonetheless offer possibilities for wider consideration. I would, however, like to foreground the extent of consistency between the participants. They were unanimously positive about the AFA, despite my encouragement to discuss its limitations as well as its affordances. Indeed, their confidence and positivity grew across time. I acknowledge that their consensus is not unproblematic, and return to this briefly in the concluding section.

The following key themes are discussed in turn: i) the teachers’ sense of agency in offering the qualification; ii) their perceptions of the impact on students’ academic attainment and wellbeing; and iii) their perceptions of its impact on their own professional development and job satisfaction.

## Findings and discussion

### *The AFA as agentic and inclusive*

It was apparent from the start that the teachers were attracted by the philosophy of democracy and agency underpinning the AFA. Opting to follow a previously untried qualification was itself a risky yet empowering act, but without exception, it was the teachers’ faith in the course’s potential that led them to do so, despite having little or no time allocation. This speaks to their deep sense of need and their commitment to the

subject and their students. Cate recognised that positioning the AFA as a ‘real’ qualification, part of the school’s official curriculum, provided it with more status than simply offering an extra-curricular Creative Writing club (1:9<sup>6</sup>). Choosing to teach the AFA was also demonstrating political agency, enabling those who had taught the ALCW to continue a pro-creative writing stand. They felt part of the resistance; participation was proof that they were not going to accept that creativity could be quashed (Di, 1:9). Julia was proud that ‘we’re fighting the system’ (4:4), the ‘we’ representing teachers and students alike who were championing a cause. This energy fed course recruitment. Di was surprised at how attractive it was to students (and parents) at the start: ‘[We thought] maybe people won’t be that interested, but they really were. They *really* were’ (1:8).

Allied to this theme is the teachers’ appreciation of the AFA’s inclusive nature, making it suitable for all students, regardless of prior attainment. At Champion, the course is open to all, not just those with strong GCSE English grades. Julia stressed ‘[t]hat whole philosophy that anybody can write’ (1:1), something echoed later by Fiona when explaining that the AFA provides a niche for those ‘who have no other place to go’ (4:10) as well as appealing to ‘the [academically able] kids who’ve got something to say’ (*ibid*). And, once signed up, across the centres, despite the freedom of open or optional sessions, students consistently *chose* to attend, *chose* to write. Julia (1:4/5) recalled how Y12s wrote in their free periods and Y11s came into school after their GCSEs to attend workshops; Lou (3:4) noted that no one missed a session throughout the first year, in spite of the unsocial scheduling at Briarwood.

### **Benefits to students – ‘Experiencing it for themselves’ (Eaglestone, 2021, p. 28)**

*So, they read [their work aloud], provide copies of it. We listen; I thank them for it . . . We make written annotations and then we talk about it. And we talk about it amongst ourselves without referencing the writer, to begin with – except quite generally, like, ‘I wonder what they were thinking there’ and give the writer the right to respond afterwards . . . And I think they find that the most exciting thing. Not just the fact that it is so collaborative, but to hear real readers read your work, and find things you had no intention of them being there – just seeing how rich texts can be. (Fiona, 1:3)*

As this description of a typical workshop implies, all five teachers endorsed the AFA because they perceived real value for their students as speakers, listeners, readers and writers. Even at the start, when the workshop approach was new, Julia reflected, ‘I think that it really benefits them – it . . . gives them the creativity with language and expression which they can then bring in to not only their exam work but I think *everything*’ (1:8); for her, it was not merely a creative writing qualification, but a means of supporting the development of a range of other knowledges and skills (including those benefitting their other A Level subjects) and giving her students a voice. All the teachers spoke of high levels of student enjoyment. For instance, Fiona recalled how enthusiastically her students had sold the AFA to incoming Y11 students on options evening, having them ‘smiling and laughing’ (3:5), while Lou said simply but emphatically that students ‘loved it’ (4:10).

Teachers particularly noted the positive impact on students’ literary understanding. By the end, Fiona had come to see the course is an ‘organic’ (4:12) means of developing both reading and writing. The reading expected is more diverse than the Anglo-centric

texts demanded by the National Curriculum (and arguably the English Literature A Level too) and so expands students' cultural literacy. Several teachers noted the popularity of *The Heads of the Colored People* (Thompson-Spires, 2019), a witty, sometimes dark short story collection about the Black American experience, feminism, gender and maturation, which Cate (4:2) noted gripped Rowan's white students through challenging them to respond to subverted stereotypes. Regarding writing, Fiona unconsciously echoed Ehret (2019) in observing, 'It's quite empowering for them to see that being a writer is not something that you *become*, it's something that you are *becoming*, all the time; it's a never-ending thing' (1:6). Fiona was a novice writer at the start of the project, so this statement signals her awareness of her own writing development, and that teaching is always a 'becoming', too. Similarly, Cate reflected on how the AFA develops students' understanding of the composition process – drafting, reflecting, editing, refining – something she suggested students often overlook in a world of instant messaging where writing is 'perfunctory' (3:2), and often ill-developed at GCSE where accountability breeds formulaic responses.

The teachers were proud that the agency encouraged through the AFA meant that students were increasingly confident in taking ownership of their studies. Di's students were 'excited by the idea that it's something they are in control of, in some way' (1:5). At Briarwood, they gradually moved away from 'go-to themes' (love and relationships), discovering new interests. By the second year, 'they know the sorts of things they want to pursue' (Fiona 3:6), and Fiona later reflected on the importance of them having 'the opportunity to say things in their own way, in their own form, in their own time' (4:7).

All four schools allowed students to choose their texts for the Responsive Reading paper. Julia described how this built 'mutual trust; honesty' (2:11): students created their own communities of practice. At Eyebright and Champion, the community was extended through students from different year groups working alongside each other, dissolving the usual hierarchies. They saw themselves on a par with their fellow writers, what Freire (1970, p. 68) called 'critical co-investigators in dialogue'. Fiona described how the workshops 'legitimised [constructive] criticism' and were never nasty or caused conflict (2:8) – unlike in some university writing workshops (Gilbert, 2021; Kearns, 2009) – even when feedback was 'gloves-off' honest (2:7). This was felt to be an effective preparation for Higher Education.

The non-linear structure (allowing teachers and students to meander and wayfind), the choice and independence afforded, and the unusual teacher–student dynamic all highlight the differences between the AFA and other curriculum subjects. Students' experiences were 'different to the norm, where the classroom [is] a place where ... assessments are taken, and ... where people are judged' (Julia, 2:5); Di's students found 'there isn't a drive-through content [in the AFA] that there can be elsewhere' (1:5). At Briarwood, it was recognised as a necessary 'counterbalance' to students' other A Levels, catering for their 'thirst for a different way of working' (Lou, 3:8). Fiona spoke warmly of one, 'a brilliant writer' (1:5), who was taking Science, Mathematics and Engineering (STEM) subjects for A Level with the AFA alongside, suggesting that the dialogic nature of the AFA enriched the student's STEM experiences: she successfully applied for a Science course at an Ivy League university, her reference highlighting 'her strengths as a thinker beyond the [Science] curriculum' (Fiona, 3:10). A student at Champion secured a place to read Spanish at Oxford through discussing the AFA at interview

(Julia, 4:4). While university entrance of course relies on many factors, these teachers believed that the AFA was contributory.

Alongside these perceived academic advantages, teachers at Briarwood and Campion noted too the impact of the AFA on students' wellbeing. Fiona described how writing provided a release: students were liberated to use a 'fresh, authentic voice' (1:5) unlike any they had been able to use before, given 'the constraints of GCSEs' (*ibid.*). This notion was reinforced the following year, when Fiona described 'some just quite savage satirical writing' (3:8) by her Year 13 class about the UCAS application experience. While she acknowledged it was not necessarily great writing, 'it allowed them to . . . let off steam and have a valid thing that we then all took seriously' (*ibid.*). On another occasion, Lou described a student who suffered from severe anxiety but had a 'great gift' (3:8) for writing. She almost decided against taking the AFA because it led to an examination but, once Lou had assured her that sitting the exam was ultimately negotiable, she signed up, and became 'so happy, she hasn't looked back since' (*ibid.*), resulting in enhanced progress in her other subjects. Fiona suggested that a positive impact on wellbeing was also felt immediately before the terminal examinations in Y13. The AFA examination was scheduled before the A Levels; Fiona recalled that her students emerged 'really excited . . . there were things that they could say, they had ideas they wanted to share, they had the tools in order to do it' (4:2) and that this experience 'broke the back of the Year 13 examinations [in their other subjects] . . . and made them think that actually [they were] doable and could be enjoyable' (*ibid.*). This theme echoes connections between creative writing and mental health that have been suggested elsewhere (Gilbert, 2021).

Finally, a word on the parent group at Campion. Twelve adults studied the AFA alongside their children (including a daughter-mother-grandmother trio), with eight going forward to sit the examination. This group had tangible benefits for those involved. For instance, one parent who had had a 'horrendous' (Julia 4:6) experience at school as a dyslexic learner was judged a 'brilliant' and 'amazing' writer (especially his free-style poetry), which 'was a really big deal' (*ibid.*). Another was a palliative care nurse, who found writing cathartic; another used writing as a release whilst undergoing treatment for cancer. The group built a strong bond: 'relationships are made, and things are shared through the creative writing' (Julia, 4:2). Given that one of the aspirations of the AFA was to inspire writing in the wider community, the gains made by this parent group indicate that significant reach is possible.

### ***Nourishment for teachers – 'a continual conversation' (Eaglestone, 2021, p. 36)***

*I do get a lot out of it. Well, for me, it all it goes back into my classes. So it helps me with my relationship with the students; with everything.* (Julia, 2:6)

*It feels like a kind of cry in the wilderness . . . the sense of you as a creative person so often gets knocked out of [you when] teaching. And of course growing and developing yourself is the best way to be a good teacher.* (Lou, 3:11)

Alongside the benefits afforded their students, the participants revealed how empowering and enriching the AFA was for themselves. As facilitators, guides and fellow-writers, the opportunity to develop their pedagogy and to exercise the

agency they are unable to exert in other areas of their role had a meaningful impact on them, both professionally and personally. Their increased awareness of what writing can do and its impact on their students encouraged them to experiment with their wider departmental curricula, all leading to greater job satisfaction.

From the start, the AFA fed ‘a real hunger’ (Fiona, 1:7), providing professional ‘nourishment’ (Lou, 3:11), this semantic field of nutrition suggesting the AFA meets an existential need. In striking accord with the literature (Cremin & Oliver, 2017; Gilbert, 2021), all five teachers – whether novice or experienced writers – described how the AFA enabled them to ‘enact’ both teacher and learner positions, enhancing their confidence, competence and enjoyment, which in turn impacted on their teaching.

This indicates that the AFA can provide for English teachers on two fundamental levels. Firstly, it is highly effective (and cost-effective) continuing professional development (CPD), thus of tangible value not only to the teachers but – in a climate of ever-more-stretched CPD budgets – to their schools; secondly, writing regularly is of personal value. That these two themes – professional development and enjoyment – are interwoven in the data suggests the teachers see professional development as a key factor in their wellbeing. The close alignment was articulated particularly strongly by Lou across two interviews. She enjoyed the opportunity for creativity, ‘growing and developing’ and ‘I think . . . putting yourself on the line as a learner is really good’ (3.11). She explained she ‘greatly relished’ writing regularly alongside students: it made her ‘less precious’, ‘less worried’; ‘it improved my self-confidence and made me realise that it’s something I fundamentally enjoy’ (4:9).

The flexibility of the specification, giving teachers the opportunity to shape the curriculum, is another factor in enhancing their professional development and enjoyment. Julia explained how her writing sessions were not ‘pinned down . . . [as] I don’t think that writing happens like that’, but responsive to ‘the mood and reading where they are at that particular time’ (1:10). All appreciated being able to respond to the moment, finding inspiration in their experiences, their reading and their discussions with their students; these experiences guided and informed their pedagogy.

As shown in Table 2, some teachers were experienced writers while others did not identify as writers beforehand, but the AFA enabled them to develop as writers, a theme which developed across the project. For instance, Fiona initially acknowledged that she lacked confidence as a writing teacher (1:4), despite having enjoyed writing poetry as a teenager and regularly modelling writing for her KS3 and KS4 classes. She shared her writer’s block and nervousness with her class, underlining her novice position – ‘I am learning alongside them really’ (1:6). Yet writing quickly became habitual, part of her identity. At the second interview, she was notably more confident: ‘I do write more than I did before . . . and even just walking here this morning, I had lines of poetry going through my head, so I was writing those down as soon as I came in’ (2:7); by the following year she was entering writing competitions. For Di, the workshops fulfilled a long-held desire: she had always seen herself as a writer, but had had no time to pursue it (1:6). She also stressed the importance of the AFA for Early Career Teacher (ECT) CPD: the AFA at Eyebright was co-taught by a recent graduate in Creative Writing.

Similarly, although Cate had previously enjoyed writing, this increased after she started teaching the ALCW, and now continues through the AFA. She rationalised it as an opportunity to ‘do a bit more of the thing that I’ve actually always enjoyed doing’ (1:7). She has subsequently won several heats in a prestigious international competition and written the school play. She shares her work-in-progress with her students. She emphasised how enjoyment and job satisfaction combine through teaching the AFA: ‘Yeah ... I love it, and it keeps me thinking about writing and doing writing’ (3:11).

Julia, arguably the most experienced and successful writer, was the only teacher who did not always write with her students, feeling to do so might be intimidating. Rather, she saw herself as an orchestrator, writing alongside if necessary: ‘It depends if I’ve got to be “in it” or extra or beside it’ (1:6). However, she wrote anonymously on the parent blog, and made her writing regularly visible to students through, for example, participating in National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) and competitions; further, she was the only teacher to sit the examination alongside her students.

The teachers were also mindful of the different type of teacher–student relationship the AFA’s workshop model affords, new ‘spaces of avoidance and creativity and different ways of being a teacher and doing teaching – different possibilities of enactment’ (Ball et al., 2012, p. 97). I noted above how that the teachers felt the non-hierarchical structure benefitted their students, but this was ‘incredibly important’ (Lou, 3:5) to them too as they shared the vulnerabilities of their student writers, with the incumbent risks and rewards. Lou, a teacher for over 20 years, enthused, ‘I’ve not had a relationship exactly like this with a class, ever’ (3:4). Like Julia, Lou begins the workshops with tea, disrupting the hierarchical teacher–student norm and making the event social. Cate (3:11) referred to workshoping with ‘my’ creative writers, the use of the personal pronoun suggesting professional intimacy and trust: ‘Writing is about sharing yourself and you have to do that ... Warts and all ... Obviously not in an inappropriate way, but it is a different relationship that you have with them than as an English teacher, definitely’ (*ibid.*).

The data further suggests that the teachers learnt how writing, and talking *about* writing, not only benefited their own wider pedagogy – ‘having an awareness of being a writer helps you teach writing’ (Fiona, 4:7) – but extended across their departments. Lou noted as ‘a main benefit’ that the AFA ‘definitely filtered down to teaching creative writing much better all across the school’ (4:9): even in the introductory weeks, colleagues at Briarwood noticed new energy and asked to be involved too (Fiona, 2:2; Lou, 3:10). Since Lou described the GCSE as ‘pretty lethal’ and ‘formulaic’ (4:10), disliked by students and teachers alike, the scope to improve teaching at KS4 is of real import. Furthermore, reading for the AFA introduced teachers to new and diverse writers, thus expanding their awareness of literature that could be introduced in lower years. Cate described the AFA as ‘not just English, it’s something different’ (2:10), the ‘just’ implying that there is something wanting in English provision at KS3 and KS4; for Fiona, the AFA is a re-validation of a personal-response approach to English ‘that used to be at the heart of what we did [20 years ago]’ (4:12). Those teaching the AFA with colleagues recognised the efficacy of sharing ideas and co-planning. For instance, Julia (3:9), who began co-teaching the AFA with a male colleague in Y2, explained how their different reading preferences and teaching styles complemented each other, with added benefits to the students; this also had a ‘trickle-down’ impact, enhancing their teaching at KS3 and KS4.



The AFA has also had a positive effect on the participants' schools' curriculums, raising the profile of creative writing. From early on, the senior management of Briarwood noticed the 'excitement and the buzz that [it's] created in the Sixth Form' and were keen to support the department in 'finding ways of rolling that down' (Fiona, 2:4) to KS3 and KS4; a new colleague with expertise in creative writing was recruited specifically to teach the AFA in its third year. Since one factor behind Briarwood offering the AFA was to protect English staffing after a reduction in their English Literature A Level cohort, this is especially noteworthy. (Interestingly, numbers for the English Literature A Level have subsequently bounced back (Lou, 4:10), although a causal link to the AFA cannot of course be proven here.) Similarly, at Rowan, the writing undertaken in the Sixth Form had an impact on the rest of school, becoming 'part of the . . . fabric of the department' (Cate, 3:10), leading to the establishment of a KS3 Writers' Den club, creative writing introduced to Activities Week, a bespoke display board to publish students' work and a Summer School for those who had shown an aptitude for writing. Cate's 'grand plan' is to map and embed creative writing opportunities through the school to create a 'trajectory towards the creative writing [component] at GCSE, [and] ultimately the creative writing option in the Sixth Form' (2:7).

Such was the enjoyment and agency felt by the participant teachers that they were inspired to expand writing opportunities beyond their school contexts, enabling AFA students to share their work with new audiences and be involved in real-world experiences. Over the span of the project, Briarwood held a writing retreat; Rowan organised a creative writing rural residential weekend and, on another occasion, students went to write in city-centre park, then visited a bookshop to purchase summer reading. Champion ran a storytelling workshop with a willow artist, a writing retreat and a residential trip to Haworth (dubbed the Misery Tour), all of which provided intensive writing experiences central to Champion's course structure; they also participated in (and won prizes at) a local literary festival and engaged in NaNoWriMo. Additionally, the lack of central funding inspired Julia to bid successfully for grants to extend writing opportunities to students across the school, enabling Pupil Premium (PP) students to visit willow wetlands for writing inspiration and incoming Year 7 students to visit the local library and arthouse cinema. Consequently, Julia's enthusiasm for making Champion a creative writing school has created wider opportunities for students to voice 'who they are and what their story is' (Julia, 2:5).

### **Conclusions – 'the end points for literary education are not set' (Eaglestone, 2021, p. 12)**

In summary, the participants' narratives over the two years suggest that teaching the AFA changed their relationships to their jobs, their students and the subject of English. This indicates that through promoting agency and re-imagining the relationship between English teachers and their students, the AFA allows for the signature pedagogies of English to be maintained and reinvented, at least until such time as a principled Curriculum review is realised. Both the students and their teachers develop *techne*, the craft of creative writing and knowledge of how to be critical readers; through membership of a dialogic body, they also acquire wisdom and judgement – *phronesis* – about what they enjoy, what they value and the power of language.



Although it is not a panacea – its scope and reach are currently limited, and this paper does not explore what may happen were the AFA to be taught by *less* inclusive, energetic, engaged teachers – the participants’ testimony suggests that the qualification has the potential to shape and sustain a more creative, affective practice. I acknowledge both that the sample is small, and that the teachers offering the AFA are unlikely to be those considering leaving teaching, since their commitment to the course suggests a will for positive change. However, all five participants (and others who generously provided feedback on this paper), coming from different types of schools and bringing with them different levels of experience and confidence in writing, concur that the AFA offers both the ‘knowledge that’ and ‘knowledge how’ (Winch, 2012, p. 310) they need to develop their skills, craft and subject philosophy. While it could be argued that their positivity is simply a reflection of their many hours’ work (and they could not acknowledge their efforts had been wasted), their unanimity was striking and convincing. There was a shared sense that their *individual* participation, their exercising of choice, judgement and agency, enabled a ‘breadth of understanding and self-understanding’ (Winch, 2012, p. 320), supporting deep thought about their subject and practice, while their *collective* participation has the potential to forge and maintain a community of practice, supporting others in field.

Although larger-scale longitudinal research is needed, this evidence that the AFA inspires confidence even to those new to writing has implications for English ITE programmes: the AFA and other practitioner-led initiatives could be introduced to ECTs to support them develop confidence and agency from the start. (In parallel, exploring the impact of having developing writers rather than specialists teaching creative writing could also be of interest to Higher Education writing courses). Furthermore, such initiatives may have an impact on career longevity. It is known that enjoyment of one’s role enhances teacher retention (Perryman & Calvert, 2020), so the pleasure that the participants derive from teaching the AFA suggests that English teachers elsewhere might continue longer in the profession, if afforded similar opportunities. Studies in these areas are necessary and urgent.

Finally, it is important to observe that English teaching is self-evidently not an end in itself, but fundamental to the education of the next generation: to equip them to respond to the ‘troubled times’ (Facer, 2019, p. 3) we live in and cope with ‘a continuously changing world’ (Arendt, 1954, p. 9). Accordingly, the need to re-imagine is greater than ever: young people must look with fresh eyes to counter risks known and as-yet-unknown. It is therefore the duty of English teachers to incite agency in their students, enabling them to create something ‘radically new’ to ‘accompany [them] into the future’ (Osberg, 2010, p. 168). Facer emphasises that students should be practised in envisaging, experimenting and developing flexible responses, processes which happen through being creative:

*Making, telling, listening to and reading stories in education . . . is not trivial, rather, it is a deadly serious business of identifying and articulating ideas of the future and engaging with the rich complexities of the present.* (2019, p. 11)

This highlights how *techne* and *phronesis*, developed through the signature pedagogies of English, are vital to equip students for the problems of the world they inhabit; indeed, they are vulnerable without them. Yet if teachers lack professional agency and confidence themselves, it is difficult for them to support the development of their students’ agency. Courses such as the AFA help teachers help students to take the stories they make off the page and into the world. It is when the stories are enacted that they will have an impact.

## Notes

1. General Certificate of Secondary Education, sat by most 15–16 year-olds in England
2. Office for Standards in Education.
3. The PEE (Point, Evidence, Explain) and PETAL (Point, Evidence, Technique, Analysis, Link) acronyms are used to scaffold paragraphs in analytical writing.
4. The retention rate of teachers in England has fallen by 6.8% since 2010 (Fullard & Zuccollo, 2021). Discrete figures are not available for secondary English.
5. Further details about the AFA, including its course structure, assessment procedures and professional development guidance etc. may be found at <https://writersexaminationboard.com/>
6. The first number in the bracket indicates which interview is referenced, the second the page number.
7. Due to the availability and location of schools who consented to participate (ease of access was important, as the project not externally funded), three of the four are girls' schools, and three are located in the South West. Note other schools offering the AFA have mixed or male cohorts.
8. In 2021, there were around 50 candidates from 8 schools, with average grades on the B/A boundary.

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