

Re-reading Dartmouth, *English in Australia* (51.3)

Growth and the category of experience

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Growth and the category of experience

Abstract: in John Dixon's account of Dartmouth, experience is seen as central to the business of English as a school subject. Experience, for Dixon, is the raw material that is worked on in the classroom. What kinds of theory inform this emphasis on experience, and what are the curricular and pedagogic implications of this version of English? How does Dixon's argument about experience sit with the work of other Dartmouth participants, such as D. W. Harding and James Britton? Does it have anything to offer us now, fifty years on?

I first read *Growth through English* (Dixon, 1967/1975) in 1984, when I was learning to be a teacher. I confess that I didn't think much of it then. On my pre-service teacher education course, I was somewhat preoccupied with Althusser. I wasn't a fan; on the contrary, I was attempting to conduct an argument with Althusser and his notion of teachers as (for the most part) mere functionaries of the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971). My first experience of a massively diverse inner-London school was enough to convince me that what I took to be Althusser's lofty determinism didn't begin to account for what I was observing. I wasn't interested in his notion of the exceptional teacher as hero, largely because what I observed going on around me was much more interesting, dynamic and complicated. A theory which left so little place for the agency of school students and their teachers did not seem credible to me; so I was, in some sense, in search of a theoretical position that would have been useful to me in understanding more about what I saw going on in the classrooms where I found myself.

But at the time I didn't think that John Dixon offered me much in my quarrel with Althusser. My fairly cursory reading of *Growth through English* was framed by a set of assumptions about what 'personal growth' meant. As others have done (Eagleton, 1985-6; Medway, 1990; Marshall, 2000; Smagorinsky, 2002; Snapper, 2007), I took it to represent a liberal-humanist, individualist approach to English in particular and schooling in general, and so, I think, I dismissed it. I read with approval Harold Rosen's critique of this emphasis on the personal:

Perhaps, in the necessary emphasis we have given to *personal* growth, language for *personal* development and literature as an intensely *personal* exploration, we have made English sound like the greatest ego-trip ever invented and we have forgotten that when working-class children have responded to our teaching then it is ... because we have seen them as socially constituted human beings who can draw sustenance for the imagination from their own world and its values, from parents, grandparents and neighbours. (Rosen, 1977, pp. 206-7)

I suspect, too, that I was somewhat dismissive of 'growth' itself as a way of thinking about educational processes, because of its Romantic, Rousseauesque connotations. It conjured up, for me, an idealised image of childhood – whereas what I could see, in front of me, was the reality of school as a site of struggle (Gramsci, 1971; Mayo, 2010; Khalanyane, 2010).

Re-reading Dixon's book earlier this year, I was shocked. (I confess that this is not, for me, an uncommon experience. I have come to feel distinctly queasy about re-reading anything that I first read some time ago, simply because, more often than not, what I read now is so markedly different from what I am expecting to read, from my memory of past reading. I'm happy to subscribe to the view that each reading of a text is a re-writing; but there's still, for me, a deep sense of discomfort, a worry that what is revealed in the process is both the

superficiality of my earlier reading and the shoddy unreliability of my memory.) What I discovered was a very different account of English and its purposes than the one that I thought I knew: different, more interesting, and with much more to offer to us now, in the quite different circumstances of 2016, than I had anticipated. My surprise at the vitality of *Growth through English* began even before I reached Dixon's words. In the edition that I was reading (Dixon, 1967/1975), the account of Dartmouth is framed by Squire and Britton's foreword – a foreword that indicates how much had changed, not just in education but also in the wider political and economic landscape, in less than a decade. The foreword is, among other things, a grim reminder that versions of austerity politics and of neoliberalism have been with us for longer than we might care to acknowledge. And much of what it says about progressive traditions of English teaching in hard times resonates clearly with the contexts in which we are working today.

In what follows, I want to focus on one strand of Dixon's argument, which is the use he makes of the category of experience. It is a key term throughout *Growth through English*, crucial to the picture of English that Dixon sketches, and it's worth considering the use to which it is put. He asks us to 'accept personal experience as the vital core of English work' (Dixon, 1967/1975, p. 48). He argues that the activities of the English classroom (writing a diary or a poem, and so on) are meaningless – mere parlour games, as he puts it – if they are construed as ends in themselves, as intrinsically valuable skills; the teacher's rationale for such activities, Dixon insists, is that they are organised 'in the hope of effecting insight into experience' (ibid., p. 33). So experience here is privileged, represented as, in some quite important sense, the *content* of the subject. (It scarcely needs saying that this approach stands in stark contrast to most of the ways in which the content of English has been represented in the dominant discourses of policy in more recent decades, where isolable skills and/or a narrowly-circumscribed canon of prescribed texts have provided the ever-so-conveniently assessable core of the subject.)

Dixon suggests how experience might figure within subject English:

Part of our work in written English, then, is to foster the kind of looking and the kind of talk and writing that direct observation of experience demands. We do so, not in the detached systematic way of a scientist, but by watching for, and even helping to provide, moments when such experiences are of personal importance to pupils. For it is their involvement in the experience that will draw them into writing. (Dixon, 1967/1975, p. 51)

The emphasis here is on specificity, immediacy, personal significance. It's not hard to see the influence of Leavis in this, in the mistrust of systems, the insistence on an alertness to the particular, the development of forms of sensibility. And perhaps it was passages like this that made my younger self somewhat dismissive of what Dixon had to offer. Wasn't there a need, I wondered, for some systematicity, for opportunities to generalise, to stand back and consider the historical forces that had shaped the particular moment of experience? Mightn't such perspectives also be necessary in making sense of experience?

But there is more to Dixon's argument than this might indicate, as becomes evident when he moves on to explore the relation between experience and the literary:

... the English specialist is often tempted to restrict himself to looking at life through fictions – quite forgetting that one can also look at people and situations direct. Those who succumb will dismiss as "sociology" an interest in the life of the city or the countryside. ... If an interest in literature is to inform and modify our encounter with life itself, the teacher must bring into a vivid relationship life

as it is enacted and life as it is represented. ... For all it must imply at least a readiness to help pupils explore aspects of their immediate lives with the same insight we expect of their fictional representations. (ibid., pp. 54-5)

I'll come back later to what might be problematic about Dixon's binary opposition of life and literature. First, though, it is important to appreciate the claim that is being made here for the scope of English. The category of experience with which Dixon is working here is a hugely expansive one – and a thoroughly ecumenical one, too. It is substantially different from the way in which John Dewey (1938) represented the relationship between experience and education. Dewey, as a good Kantian, was quite clear that experience had a vital role in learning – but only some kinds of experience. What mattered for him was the quality of the experience, since only good experiences, ones carefully shaped and prepared for by the teacher, would result in beneficial outcomes, whereas other experiences might be unproductive or even damaging to learning.

Dixon's claim, on the other hand, is that *all* experience – experience over which the teacher has no control whatsoever – has its place in the English classroom. No prior judgements are to be made about the quality of life as it is enacted, just as it would be foolish to exclude representations of life on the basis of the desirability of that which is represented. One way of analysing this difference is that Dewey treats experience primarily as a pedagogic category, a means to an end, whereas for Dixon experience is both the stuff of the curriculum itself – the material to be worked on in the classroom – and also a rationale for the subject. So the central concern of English becomes the representation of experience, and hence the intimate and ongoing relationship between the learners' lifeworlds and English as a school subject.

In this version of English, there is a similarly expansive approach to the category of the literary. Texts themselves, Dixon argues, are inert; it is readers who breathe life into them, animating the 'sequence of signs' (ibid., p. 56) by drawing on life experience. The claim about what is involved in the reading process already begins to complicate the binary opposition of life and literature. More radical than this, though, is the insistence that there is no sharp divide between the literary and the work that school students produce: the latter, as Dixon reports, was accepted at Dartmouth as 'embryonic literature' (ibid., p. 55). This idea was much further elaborated by another Dartmouth participant, James Britton. Britton took from the psychologist, D. W. Harding (who was also at Dartmouth), the concept of language in the spectator role (Harding, 1963/1982; Britton, 1970; Britton & Pradl, 1982). My purpose in mentioning this now is not to engage in the debate about the usefulness of the spectator-participant continuum as an analytical tool (cf. Reid, 1984), but to focus on one important consequence of Britton's work in this area, which was *to reposition literature as one instance among many of language in the spectator role*.

This approach has been taken as evidence that Britton and the 'London school' were not really interested in literature but in 'language' (and hence might be conveniently counterposed to the Leavisites of the 'Cambridge school' – see Marshall, 2000; Ball et al. 1990; Hilliard, 2012). I think this is a misreading. What I take to be the force of Dixon and Britton's argument is not at all a rejection of the value of the aesthetic but, rather, a rejection of the exclusivity of any particular selection or instantiation of the aesthetic. Theirs was a profoundly democratic vision of the place of literature, not as the best that has been thought and said, to be appreciated by subsequent generations, not as a canon, to enforce the authority of the institution that determined what was to be included and hence what was to be passed down, but as a set of representational strategies and affordances, a repertoire of ways of "representing our experience of the world" (Britton, 1970, p. 135). What this vision

insists on is the agency of learners, their creativity, their scope to use the semiotic resources at their disposal to make meaning. And this, it seems to me, is a far more radical picture of English than my younger self realised. Its radicalism lies precisely in the way in which the learners are positioned: not as deficits, in need either of drilling and upskilling or of exposure to a prescribed set of cultural artefacts, but rather as active participants in the making of culture. It is the category of ‘experience’, conceived as the ‘content’ of English, that allows Dixon to decisively break from a narrow focus on skills, which completely elides questions of subjectivity, of how we engage with the world and with each other.

Only just under the surface of the category of experience, in the way that Dixon operates with it, is a political project: a project that insists on the value of the everyday, of ordinary lived experience. From this perspective, Dartmouth, and Dixon’s account of it, need to be seen in the context of the work of people like Raymond Williams, with his insistence on the ordinariness of culture, culture as the property of the working class (see, for example, Williams, 1958; 1961/1965; see also Green, 1990, for an illuminating exploration of the links between Williams’ work and ‘growth’ pedagogy). One way in which this is manifested in Dixon – and also in the work of Britton (1970) – is, as I have suggested, in the erasure of the line dividing the literary from the representations of experience produced by school students. This is demonstrated very clearly in *Growth through English* in the method Dixon adopts: in the way he presents what individual learners and groups of learners have said and written as worthy of attention in its own right – not as a preparation for adult life, or even as a way into some other kind of disciplinary knowledge or practice. Tony Burgess has argued that in Britton’s work the extensive use of quotation from the speech of children and young people isn’t present as a mere embellishment to Britton’s thinking but, rather, the means whereby the thinking is advanced (Burgess, 2016). I want to suggest that something similar is going on in *Growth through English*.

In the section from *Growth through English* from which I quoted earlier, where Dixon presents the enactment of life in opposition to its representation, it would appear that experience is being treated as separate from, and in some senses antecedent to, learning. It is a given – the raw material that can then be worked on in the English classroom. There is a difficulty with this conception of experience. As George Kelly, the American psychologist whose work Britton references in *Language and Learning*, argues:

Experience is made up of the successive construing of events. It is not constituted merely by the succession of events themselves.

...

The burden of our assumption is that learning is not a special class of psychological processes; it is synonymous with any and all psychological processes. It is not something that happens to a person on occasion; it is what makes him a person in the first place. (Kelly, 1955/1963, pp. 73, 75)

If, as Kelly has it, experience is never merely stuff that happens (one damn thing after another), but rather is always and everywhere mediated through consciousness, then it cannot properly be regarded as raw material: it is always-already processed. And language, as Marx and Engels (1970, p. 51) observed, is “as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well”. Language – and other semiotic resources, as Dixon recognised in the final chapter, added in the 1975 edition – are inextricably social. Because of the mediating role of such representational resources, experience itself has to be seen as the product of a socially derived consciousness. And thus, given the vitally important role of language and

other semiotic systems in the construal of experience, there can be no merely ‘personal’ experience.

This is, clearly a very different conception of experience from that which Dewey was advancing: there are no neat distinctions here between good and bad learning experiences. And it might seem markedly different from Dixon’s emphasis on the personal, if we interpret that as an exclusive concern with the individual.

What emerges from the concrete examples of practice that are studied through *Growth through English*, however, is rather subtler (and more in line with Kelly) than what is presented in much of Dixon’s argument itself. What we see are *processes* – socially mediated processes – whereby thought-in-relation-to-experience is refined, developed, expanded, modified, in and through talk, reading and writing. And this accords with the view of language that Britton develops, with a little help from Harding (1963/1982): his close attention to the processes whereby experience can be rendered into words; his emphasis on signs not as the vehicles for already-formed thoughts but rather on the vital significance of ‘shaping at the point of utterance’; his commitment to a fully Vygotskian understanding of the complexity of the relation between the everyday concepts that are derived from experience and the so-called ‘scientific’ concepts that are encountered in organised, disciplinary knowledge (Britton, 1970; Britton & Pradl, 1982).

Experience, in the sense in which Dixon, glossed by Kelly and Britton, might be taken to use the term, positions English – ‘the meeting point of experience, language and society’ (Dixon, 1967/1975, p. 85) – as a subject directly in relation to the world beyond the classroom, a world in which students are already learners, cultural agents, meaning-makers, participants in networks of rich semiotic activity; and it insists that English must take account of, and work with, that wider world. There have, of course, been huge changes in that world in the past half century – changes in the communicational and representational resources available to young people (and the rest of us), that necessarily have an impact in reshaping experience itself (cf. Medway, 1995; Yandell, 2016). And there is a real danger that English as it is conceptualised in policy (particularly in my corner of a small island) is becoming increasingly remote from the communicative and representational practices that are accomplished by young people in other places and spaces, real and virtual.

This might still seem to leave Dixon and his allies at Dartmouth vulnerable to the criticism which my younger self levelled against him, a perspective elaborated in Peter Smagorinsky’s (2002) reading of *Growth through English*: that it is predicated on “a romantic conception of the individual” and on the assumption that “growth will always be noble, respectful, and socially constructive” (Smagorinsky, 2002, p. 26). What happens, asks Smagorinsky, when the experiences that are rendered in the classroom, and the ways in which they are mediated, are racist, homophobic, misogynist?

These are real concerns – and vitally important ones for English teachers. But what Smagorinsky has done is, in effect, to smuggle back the Deweyan binary that Dixon had rejected: good experience, from which we can learn, and bad experience, which is to be avoided (and kept out of the classroom). I no longer share this view. This doesn’t mean that I now cheerfully accept the right of students to say and do what they like, to the detriment and damage of others. Working with students’ experiences, and seeing them as centrally implicated in the content of English, doesn’t entail the suspension of judgement or the abandonment of ethical values. It doesn’t involve any romantic endorsement of the asocial (or antisocial) individual. But it might involve an understanding that values, like signs, are subject to contestation, and that such contestation can and should be enacted in English

classrooms (Yandell, 2013). And it might involve a more provisional view of culture and society, including the culture and society of the English classroom. Here, again, I wonder if Raymond Williams might provide a helpful insight into the conditions for learning and living that John Dixon was advocating:

The idea of a common culture brings together, in a particular form of social relationship, at once the idea of natural growth and that of its tending. The former alone is a type of romantic individualism; the latter alone a type of authoritarian training. Yet each, within a whole view, marks a necessary emphasis. The struggle for democracy is a struggle for the recognition of equality of being, or it is nothing. Yet only in the acknowledgement of human individuality and variation can the reality of common government be comprised. We stress natural growth to indicate the whole potential energy, rather than the selected energies which the dominative mode finds it convenient to enlist. At the same time, however, we stress the social reality, the tending. Any culture, in its whole process, is a selection, an emphasis, a particular tending. The distinction of a culture in common is that the selection is freely and commonly made and remade. The tending is a common process, based on common decision, which then, within itself, comprehends the actual variations of life and growth. The natural growth and the tending are parts of a mutual process, guaranteed by the fundamental principle of equality of being. (Williams, 1958/1961, p. 323)

Re-reading Williams now makes me understand Dixon's notion of 'growth' differently, and much more sympathetically. Indeed, I blush at my younger self's casual dismissiveness of it.

One final point, which has particular poignancy at a moment in history when, in different parts of the Anglophone world, some pretty dark forces are asserting appallingly restricted and exclusive notions of national identity, is this: Dixon's concept of experience, while remaining attentive to the local and the particular, returns us as English teachers to a more generous, enlightened and enlightening, recognition that using the resources of culture to transform mere events into something that might be recognised as experience is what makes us human.

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