Knowing practice in English teaching?
**Research challenges in representing the professional practice of English
teachers**

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ABSTRACT: This article problematises representations of professional
practice. It investigates assumptions behind received accounts of professional
practice, including professional standards that purportedly capture what
accomplished English teachers "should know and be able to do", "scientific"
studies that construct accounts of classrooms from the standpoint of academic
researchers, and narratives written by teachers that claim to explore
dimensions of classroom teaching that elude outside observers. Especially
significant are attempts by practitioner researchers to develop accounts of their
professional practice vis-à-vis constructions of their work from other
standpoints. We argue that it is timely for practitioner researchers to reflexively
examine the conditions for producing such accounts, and to address the
question of the validity of their knowledge claims. Yet this is also – crucially –
more than an epistemological issue, but one that requires acknowledging the
primacy of practice for engaging with the complexities of classroom settings.
This article gives an account of our ongoing efforts to develop forms of
representation that might begin to do justice to the complexities of practice in
comparison with accepted accounts of what English teachers know and do. We
intend it to be read as a position paper which outlines a framework for
research on English teaching as a dynamic culture practice.

KEYWORDS: Professional practice, English teaching, standards, practitioner
research, representation, standpoint, professional knowledge

INTRODUCTION

We begin with some classroom images.

Portable classroom. Stuffy. Left over odours from class before lunch linger in the air. Some students comment on the smell as they walk in….Douglas opens large windows as students come into class. Some students head straight to Douglas, asking him questions: "Sir, are you allowed to include pictures?" "Sir, can I…in my…?" Douglas replies: "Yes, of course" to the first and gives the second student a more detailed response that is difficult to hear over the general chatter as students stroll into class on their own or in groups. They take their seats and continue to talk, some are texting or playing with their mobile phones, another is reading a comic book.

As students continue to walk into class, Douglas hands back student work – short stories – and a student nearby quickly flicks to Doug's comments on the last page. She shares the comment with the girl next to her: "What does this say?" When Doug approaches the student again, she asks him: "Sir, what does this say?" Doug reads his own writing and replies: "Mysticism". She smiles and puts her short story away. By the time Douglas nears the end of the pile of work to hand back, most chairs are occupied. Douglas asks for a show of hands of students who need The Matrix *handout that they were given last term. About 10 students put their hands up. Douglas starts handing out his spare copies. A student asks:*

"Can I get it out of my locker?"
"I've got a spare one."
"But my book's in my locker."
"Alright."

Douglas begins to explain that he will quickly refresh their memories about The Matrix *assignment that they were given last term. It's an assignment that can be done either individually or in groups and they are to only pick one of the eight options available to them and they can "mix and match" any of them. As Douglas speaks, students are quiet, some listening, some reading ahead, some stare out into the trees beyond the class windows. Uri and another boy sitting in front of me quietly point to the option they've chosen. Students begin to chatter.*

"Guys please wait…we'll give you time to talk about it in a minute."

Haydn, sitting in the front row, turns around and raises his fist mockingly at Uri and puts his fingers up to his mouth signing for him to ssshh. Uri smile…

Bella Illesca: Classroom Observation # 1

Bella Illesca has written these observations as part of a comparative research[1] project on the teaching of English in Australian schools. She conscientiously records the concrete detail of this classroom scene. One of the aims of the inquiry is to investigate how such accounts might be said to "reflect" the complexities of professional practice, how other teachers go about interpreting such accounts, and whether such accounts can be given any status as professional "knowledge", and so it is important

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[1] By "comparative research", we are referring to research in language education that compares different points of view or interpretations of teaching practice and attempts to capture the dialogue between actors holding different perspectives. Such dialogue – which, as we explain later, does not necessarily aim at "consensus" or agreement – should be at the core of representing the complexities of teaching practice. The actors in this dialogue represent different perspectives on teaching practice: that of the teacher, that of an outside observer (who might be another teacher or academic researcher), as well as other viewpoints.

for Bella to try to capture everything that is happening around her. Douglas McClenaghan is a teacher in a secondary school in a north-eastern suburb of Melbourne, and Bella is playing the role of "critical friend". Douglas has invited her into his classroom in order to trace the matches and mismatches between his intentions and what his students actually accomplish, between his reading of the lesson and how his students experience it, between his teaching and their learning. For his part, Douglas has committed himself to providing Bella with his lesson plans, where he provides a rationale for his approach, as well as a diary in which he reflects on the lessons as he sees them.

Week 1 Sessions

The Year 9 literature class had viewed The Matrix *twice – once all the way through then the second time to pause and discuss what was happening in the film. In the second viewing I made regular specific reference to the film techniques being used, in particular semiotic elements. The film is particularly suited to this kind of analysis and discussion. I chose* The Matrix *because it is contemporary and is rewarding to view and to discuss. Its use of intertextuality encourages students to look at films in this way and to an extent reconceptualise their analytical work and creative work in this way.*

As soon as we had watched the film students asked whether they would do questions on the text, obviously something they are used to doing and expect to do. My alternative is the assignment sheet that I produced. What I hope to achieve with this lesson and with the unit of work as a whole is to encourage students to create texts of their own. I have attempted to give them a range of activities from which to choose or to use as a basis or inspiration to fashion an activity of their own. To an extent I have drawn on some traditional notions of text study – the character study, the scene analysis – but I have also attempted to invite students to create texts, to develop their own angle on the film. Each of the activities is open-ended and flexible. I am hoping that students will develop them in their own ways.

I was pleased with the lesson on Tuesday. Students negotiated tasks or their versions of tasks with me. There are two groups who are making films. One group (the one in "the room up the back") is writing a detailed script which tells the story of a girl who has the ability to see the Matrix and is recruited by the crew of a hovercraft. The other film is less tightly or conventionally scripted as a narrative; it is a combination of character study and re-creations of scenes from the film.

Some other students are working on the film soundtrack option. It is interesting that the boys who are doing the task are very keen whereas the girls who have chosen this task, with one exception, seem to have settled on it as a default task. Two of the boys tell me that they have already done some work on their soundtrack over the holidays. They are at the stage of designing an insert for the CD case and a label for the CD itself. One girl is also very keen and quickly gets down a list of possible songs then starts doodling a CD label design on a piece of paper. The less involved girls are not openly resisting the task; I suspect that both myself as teacher and the work we did last term built up some credit with them so that faced by a task they find unengaging they nevertheless go through the motions of compliance without engagement. It is a salutary reminder that not all students, not even conventionally "good" students, necessarily internalise the kinds of approaches to texts modelled, nor will they always respond to ostensibly more innovative approaches. One of my aims is to encourage students to appropriate and possibly internalise ways of thinking, acting, relating and communicating through particular practices, and artefacts such as The Matrix *work sheet. I encourage students to participate in activities in which knowledge is used and created rather than transmitted and reproduced. For me knowledge is not a commodity or product…*

Douglas McClenaghan: Diary

These texts suggest the potential of a dialogical exchange between Bella and Douglas, as they reflect on what it means to teach English in Australia at present. Douglas's lesson plans and diary entries, as well as Bella's lesson observations, are part of this dialogue. Yet this potential would hardly be realized by trying to match Bella's comments with Doug's, as though one set of classroom observations might be used simply to triangulate the other. This would hardly be in a dialogical spirit at all, in the sense in which Bahktin defines a "genuine thought" as coming into "living contact with another foreign thought, embodied in the voice of another person, that is, in the consciousness of another person as expressed in his word" (Bakhtin, 1973, p.71). Bella knowingly casts her narrative in the present tense in order to convey a sense of the immediacy of the events as they unfold, as students tumble into class, and eventually suspend their individual preoccupations (the text messaging, the games) in order to focus on the business of the lesson. Douglas' diary entries, however, initially locate these happenings in the past, and the juxtaposition of the two texts suggests the elusiveness of practice – the fact that, having happened, it *is* past (grammatical pun intended) – rather than opening up any prospect of pinning everything down. By reflecting on the course of the lessons over a few days, Douglas begins to articulate a perspective on his teaching and education generally ("Knowledge is not a commodity or product") that obviously forms part of his continuing conversation with Bella, and this suggests the possibility of locating what is happening in this lesson within larger contexts, including a particular tradition of English pedagogy, as well as globalizing economic forces.

Viewing what happens in classrooms does not, in short, involve privileging the interactions between teachers and their students as though they occur in a space that somehow exists apart from other contexts in which they operate. On the contrary, it is necessary to posit classrooms as sites that are mediated by a multitude of factors, including existing traditions of curriculum and pedagogy, the professional culture(s) of teachers, as well as the waves of mandated reforms that have become a pronounced feature of our globalising era. Such "extra-individual dimensions" must be acknowledged in order to fully understand the complexities of any instance of professional practice (cf. Kemmis, 2005). This means endeavouring to go beyond the present moment, and the social relationships that are played out in any classroom, in order to understand the interactions between teachers and students within a larger network of relationships that stretch beyond their immediate circumstances (cf. Smith 2005). Douglas McClenaghan's avowal, that "knowledge is not a commodity or product", places him within a certain tradition of English curriculum and pedagogy, which itself should be taken into account as part of the history of English teaching, and of the discourses informing and shaping the field and its practice in Australia (cf. Green, 2003, 2004; Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000). Rather than aspiring to some kind of naturalistic verisimilitude when trying to represent classroom practice, it is necessary to recognise how the *immediacy* of the events as Bella relates them is in fact *mediated* by a heteroglot environment involving conflict between the language of neo-liberal reforms (the "knowledge economy", "capacity building", "inputs" and "outputs", "performance appraisal") and contrasting discourses.

Our aim in this essay is to problematise representations of professional practice. We shall scrutinise assumptions behind received accounts of professional practice, including professional standards that purportedly capture what accomplished English

teachers "should know and be able to do", "scientific" studies that construct versions of classroom events from the standpoint of academic researchers, and narratives written by teachers that claim to capture dimensions of classroom teaching that elude outside observers. Especially significant are attempts by practitioner-researchers to develop accounts of their professional practice vis-à-vis constructions of their work from other standpoints. Such writing is often presented as a counterpoint to standards-based reforms, and we do indeed wish to affirm the way teachers are able to challenge "second-hand and externalising definitions" of their work through writing of this kind (Bahktin, 1973; cf. Doecke. 2006); but for this very reason it is vital for practitioner researchers to reflexively examine the conditions for producing such accounts, and to address the question of the validity of their knowledge claims.

Yet, as the foregoing texts have shown, this is also – crucially – more than an epistemological issue, but one that requires us to reconsider the way professional practice is enacted in classroom settings. We feel that it is timely to acknowledge the complexities of that practice, and to resist any temptation to fall back on accepted accounts of what teachers know and do. The conventional language of practice often conceals the very situations of practice to which it supposedly refers. Even to speak about connecting theory with practice runs the risk of resorting to a cliché which fails to bring these dimensions together in any compelling way. We remain locked in our habitual practices even when we think that we are doing otherwise. We say that we are doing one thing while doing something else. It is necessary, in short, to refocus on the question of how to "represent" professional practice and how this might constitute a distinctive form of "knowing" about, in and for practice.

STELLA (AND BEYOND)

The distinctive character of our professional landscape at the present moment is arguably captured by the word "standards". Standards-based reforms have proliferated in Australia and other Western countries, and they now mediate the professional practice of English teachers (and teachers generally) in significant ways (Darling-Hammond, 2004). These reforms include a growing emphasis on standardised literacy testing as a mechanism for rendering schools and teachers accountable. Such testing constructs students as though their community contexts and affiliations can be discounted, allowing the measurement of the performance of individual students (and of their teachers), who otherwise remain more or less undifferentiated (Comber and Cormack, 2007). Of special significance for our purposes in this paper, however, are professional standards that claim to embody what accomplished teachers "should know and be able to do" (to use the language typifying the discourse). The latter phenomena are interesting because they show that standards are not only being imposed from above, by governments concerned to regulate teachers' work, but also because they have been embraced by sectors of the teaching profession as a means of affirming their professional expertise.

A few years ago, Margaret Gill (1999) saw the challenge for English teachers in Australia as one of formulating their own standards or having others do it for them. This obviously made good sense strategically, signalling a preparedness to entertain the logic of standards and the possibility of representing the professional practice of English teachers in the form which standards typically assume. For the English

teachers who subsequently took on the job of developing professional standards, it was a matter of continually "confronting" paradoxes, as they strove to formulate standards that would avoid being reduced to forms of individual performance appraisal and control (Doecke & Gill, 2000). The Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), which they subsequently developed can be read as a response to a policy environment characterised by neo-liberal reforms, emphasising the need for individual performance appraisal against measurable indicators. Although STELLA presents an alternative to standards designed simply for regulatory purposes, it is recognisably still a product of the policy environment that has generated such mechanisms, simply by virtue of the fact that it represents the professional knowledge and practice of English teachers *as* a set of professional standards.[2]

STELLA nonetheless provides a convenient starting point for inquiring into how to represent professional practice because of the way that the English teachers involved in its development struggled with "paradox", arguably setting STELLA apart from comparable attempts by education systems and other subject associations (in Australia and elsewhere) to formulate professional standards. The teachers and researchers who developed STELLA strenuously resisted any assumption that the logical extension of standards should be a set of mechanisms for measuring the performance of individual teachers. For them, the challenge was one of constructing accounts of the knowledge and practice of English teachers that have currency amongst teachers working in diverse settings around Australia. Any general statement about English teaching typically struggles with the deeply contextualized nature of teachers' work, and such statements always run the risk of being empty generalizations that fail to capture the specific characteristics of professional practice enacted in different school communities.

How might the general statements about professional practice that typify standards documents meaningfully intersect with the local conditions in which teachers work? To address this problem, teachers who participated in STELLA wrote narratives that sought to evoke the rich complexities of school communities, testing general claims about "accomplished" English teaching against specific accounts of professional practice (Doecke, 2004). Rather than beginning by trying to formulate standards, they chose to write "stories" about their professional practice that might then form a basis for general statements of the kind that one finds in standards documents. One of the many paradoxes they confronted was that by writing narratives about their teaching, they were constantly reminded of the situated nature of their professional practice,

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[2] In 1998 the Australian Research Council provided funding for a three-year research project (1999-2001) to develop "professional standards" for the English teaching profession. The project team was a consortium of researchers from three major universities (Monash University, Edith Cowan University, Queensland University of Technology) together with the two national English teaching associations (Australian Association for the Teaching of English [AATE] and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association [ALEA]), along with representatives from state government education departments from each participating state. The project was based at three sites, each involving panels of 20-30 teachers which took responsibility for different aspects, and it was eventually expanded with workshops, forums and consultation in all the Australian states and territories. The scale of the project can be gauged from the Stella website: stella.org.au. This website was a major outcome of the project.

and the way that any worthwhile account of teaching resists being captured by such general statements. [3]

We see this paper as part of an ongoing conversation that began with STELLA. Indeed, we seek to emulate the kind of reflexivity that characterises the most interesting aspects of that project. Yet it remains to be said that STELLA has hardly provided an effective counterpoint to standards-based reforms. On the contrary, around Australia systems at a national and state level have established regulatory structures that herald an increasing focus on improving educational outcomes against a set of benchmarks. Sometimes this involves language that initially seems congruent with the way that teachers' work is described by STELLA and the other professional standards that have been developed by subject associations in Australia (for other examples of standards see http://aamt.edu.au/standards/; http://www.asta.edu.au). "Teaching is complex and demanding work…" – so begins a Victorian Education Department document, entitled *Professional learning in effective schools*. Yet one does not have to read this document much further before sensing that professional learning is being recast in a radically different way, with a significant emphasis on the "impact" that such learning should have on student outcomes. We find, in fact, that teachers' professional learning and their professional practice have been formalised into a neat set of principles relating to what "effective teachers" do, all of which should lead to "improving the learning outcomes of all students regardless of their socio-economic background or geographic location" (DE&T, 2005, p. 2, cf. Avis, 2003). Such texts are what they are – it would be silly to think that the current wave of neo-liberal reforms shows any signs of abating. What they do is remind us that it is vitally important to continually revisit the question of the locally specific nature of English teaching, as distinct from uncritically accepting general claims about what accomplished teachers of English should know and do.

Our thinking, in short, might be said to both operate within and beyond the framework provided by STELLA. The comparative research featured at the start of this paper is an attempt to refocus on local examples of professional practice and to explore the nature of professional learning in specific communities. Soon we plan to extend this research to include teachers in inland NSW and Western Sydney. Yet although this work reflects a similar set of concerns to those which motivated

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[3] The solution they hit on was to juxtapose the stories they wrote about their professional practice with aspirational statements about what they were collectively trying to achieve as a profession. It now seems inevitable that STELLA should have taken the form of a multileveled account of English literacy teaching in Australia, in which the teachers' narratives and standards statements exist in a dialogical relationship with each other. Readers of the STELLA hypertext can use the standards statements to interrogate the teachers' narratives; they can likewise use the narratives to question the validity of the generalizations made by the statements. In addition, they can reflect on the "keywords" that these teachers felt constituted their professional vocabulary – words such as "negotiation", "respect", "rigour", "enjoyment", "growth", "repertoire" – as well as scrutinizing a range of articles that reflect a spectrum of opinions about the value of professional standards. They can thereby gain a sense of the genesis of the standards, instead of merely engaging with them as a finished product. The very form that STELLA takes challenges many of the assumptions at the basis of other attempts to formulate professional standards, which treat any specific example of professional practice as merely illustrative of those standards or – worse still – reify those standards as benchmarks against which specific examples of professional practice can be measured, thus deflecting any scrutiny of the standards themselves. See http://www.stella.org.au.

STELLA, it also opens up a new level of inquiry. We wish to interrogate the knowledge claims made by teachers when they construct representations of their teaching practice. How can their personal accounts of teaching possibly claim to possess "epistemic merit" (Fenstermacher, 1994, p.13)? What criteria need to be satisfied for such accounts to have currency beyond the contexts out of which they emerge? Why should an account of teaching written by an English teacher in a state school in inland New South Wales have any relevance to a teacher working in an elite private school in Melbourne? How can accounts of professional practice grounded in specific educational settings constitute a trans-local "knowledge" about English teaching? What value does such "knowledge" have within the context of international debates about English language curriculum and pedagogy? In what sense can they be said to "reflect" the professional practice of teachers? How do teachers ultimately judge them in terms of being trustworthy or valid?

We anticipate that by asking such question we may eventually be able to look beyond the standards-based reforms that characterise the present moment and begin to think and talk about English teaching outside a standards framework as it is conventionally understood.

RETURNING TO CLASSROOMS

Professional standards are used as frameworks for evaluating teaching, ranging from formal systems of performance appraisal that pretend to psychometric precision (such as those developed by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards in the United States) to attempts by teachers to critically reflect on their practice on a day-to-day basis (for example, Philp, 2006; Howie, 2004). Yet, whether standards are used for formal or relatively informal purposes, more often than not such judgments beg the question of the epistemological status of standards as "representations" of professional practice and how such statements about accomplished teaching can be said to "reflect" teachers' work. Our concern here is less with interrogating the validity of standards themselves than with returning to this primary question of *how to represent the complexities of professional practice*. How can we determine the epistemological status of any account of classroom practice? How can teachers' professional learning be given any currency through representations of their practice? What forms should such learning take in order to be granted validity?

We are arguing that there is a need for a "return" to teachers and their classrooms, in a bid to reclaim that social space in all of its complexity and multifacetedness. The comparative research in which Bella Illesca, Douglas McClenaghan and other teachers in Melbourne are involved is a modest attempt to enact this return. By focusing specifically on detailed accounts of a series of lessons written by participating teachers, in collaboration with "critical friends", it attempts to trace how teachers experience professional learning and construct professional knowledge, the forms that such knowledge takes, and the criteria they use to judge its validity. The very act of observing a teacher's classroom poses, of course, a number of challenges. In this regard, protocols developed by the International Mother Tongue Education Network (Van de Ven, 2001), emphasising the importance of dialogue between "critical friends" and participating teachers, have proved to be useful resources in developing classroom observation accounts. Bella Illesca and Douglas McClenaghan

were following these protocols when they worked together. The idea is that teachers agree to discuss with critical friends what they are trying to accomplish in each lesson, allow their classes to be observed over several lessons, and then reflect on what they actually accomplished, and whether this matches what they were trying to achieve. Teachers have been traditionally and perhaps understandably suspicious about "opening the classroom door", and collaborative partnerships between teachers and researchers of the kind that we are envisaging here are far from common. Even so, on such a basis, how might professional knowledge be constructed and validated through focused observations of classroom teachers? [4]

That question is surely of vital interest to all English teachers (and also to the systems in which they work). A crucial aspect of this comparative research is the way it positions teachers as collaborators rather than as objects of inquiry (cf. Lunenberg, et al., 2007), and in significant respects such a line of inquiry can be seen as emerging out of the community of practice to which teachers belong (in the reflexive spirit in which STELLA posits a professional community as a condition of its own making – see Doecke, 2004). A long tradition of educational research has positioned teachers as the objects of the researcher's gaze (cf. Kincheloe, 2003, p.9), typically producing accounts of classroom practice which teachers themselves have judged to be reductive and removed from the contradictions and complexities they face in their professional lives. Such a stance can compromise even what might otherwise be rich accounts of classrooms. Teachers who participated, for example, in a recent research project in the

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[4] By drawing on the work of an international network of researchers, namely the International Mother Tongue Education Network or IMEN (Van de Ven, 2001), the project we are currently developing hopes to sharpen its comparative edge and thus enhance the opportunity of participants to view their own knowledge and practice critically. IMEN researchers have been engaged in comparative research on mother-tongue education in Europe. This group has similarly been engaged in researching the professional and disciplinary practice of mother-tongue teaching. Their work is especially significant here, both because of its obvious strengths and its more problematical dimensions, although IMEN principles for engaging in comparative research have been crucial for this project, most notably:

- That mother-tongue education is a social construction, and a product of strong national educational traditions and complex policy environments
- That those policy environments are shaped by cultural and ideological factors in tension with globalizing economic and social trends
- That comparative research on classroom teachers should be "owned" by teachers who participate in the project and should convey the "voices" of classroom practitioners
- That the focus of research should be on the complexities of teachers' work, and researchers should avoid evaluative judgments about the professional accomplishment of participants

IMEN's goal has been to set up dialogue: between researchers and classroom teachers and between researchers of L-1 education across a range of national settings. At the core of this dialogue are rich accounts of classroom practices jointly constructed by teachers with "critical friends" who observe their classrooms and then engage in discussion and reflection about what they have seen. A key strategy in recording observations is to inquire into the meaning of the events observed, as distinct from judging teachers, following certain observation protocols. A critical perspective on L-1 education becomes available to participants when they read accounts of L-1 teaching produced in a variety of national settings, with the result that they are able to see their own national educational traditions, policy contexts and educational practices with an ethnographer's eye (cf. Osborn, 2004). While our focus is in the first instance is on differences between the professional cultures of teachers in diverse regions in Australia, we also aim to broaden the conversation to embrace dialogue with L-1 teachers and researchers in other national settings. Doecke has done preliminary work of this kind (see Doecke, Gill, Illesca and Van de Ven, forthcoming).

UK led by Gunther Kress were clearly the focus of the researchers' inquiry (Kress et al., 2005); it was the researcher group that produced accounts of classrooms, expressly from the point of view of academic observers, something that arguably precluded any opportunity for alternative readings, most notably by those teachers whose classrooms were being observed (cf. Paré, 2005). In our view, in contrast, teachers themselves need to have the opportunity to view English classrooms outside local and even national normative frameworks and habitual practices, in order to crystallize, name and account for teaching practice in particular settings (including their own). We believe that teacher-teacher dialogue and teacher-researcher dialogue that is genuinely two-way adds much to a research dynamic that is sometimes confined to researcher observation and interpretation.

CONFRONTING PROFESSIONAL "KNOWLEDGE"

Collaboration with practising teachers of the kind at issue here involves mediating between radically different viewpoints about the knowledge claims which teachers are able to make on the basis of their teaching experiences. There is a need to engage and yet transcend these alternative viewpoints, fostering the notion of the profession itself as a learning community that reflexively monitors the conditions for making knowledge claims about its professional practice. Too often, attempts to affirm the validity of professional knowledge run the risk of romanticizing practitioner inquiry and the forms in which teachers talk and write about their work. A case in point are claims made by advocates of "narrative inquiry" that teachers' accounts supposedly provide special access to the complexities of their professional lives. Clandinin and Connelly contend that "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience". For them, "narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18; cf. Carter, 1993).

Although this is a claim with which we have considerable sympathy, it is hardly surprising that researchers working within other traditions of inquiry should react against this apparent privileging of "narrative" and "experience". Phillips and Burbules, for example, explicitly reject such "interpretive" approaches, arguing that all inquiry should be "scientific", involving rigorous protocols that elevate "theoretical explication" above the sphere of "literary interpretation". They maintain that when conducting research (say) on classroom events, there is "a truth to the matter [that] it is our job to uncover if we can" (Phillips and Burbules, 2000, p. 78). We regard such a view as deeply problematic, particularly because of its claim to universality and its apparent disregard of situated learning and the specificity of local contexts.

Fenstermacher (1994) offers a more balanced survey of the knowledge claims made on behalf of narrative inquiry and other types of practitioner research, weighing them up against those of more current-traditional scientific inquiry. Although he observes a certain failure on the part of advocates of teachers' "knowledge" to grapple with epistemological issues, he opens up the possibility of justifying their claims vis-à-vis traditional forms of research by recognizing that any knowledge claim is the product of a particular discourse community. The knowledge claims made by proponents of narrative inquiry and other types of practitioner knowledge cannot be tested by

reverting to traditional epistemological arguments about the logic of propositional knowledge (Fenstermacher, 1994, p. 22; cf. Taylor, 1995, p. 12).   It is indeed noteworthy that both advocates of practitioner knowledge, such as Connelly and Clandinin, and proponents of "scientific" inquiry, such as Phillips and Burbules, use inclusive gestures ("we", "our") to locate their claims within a discourse community of likeminded people. As Foucault argues, any discipline should be conceived as a discourse community characterized by the application of specific methods and procedures for the production of knowledge, that establish what it means to be "in the true", and which involves renewal through the induction of members who learn how to follow its protocols (Foucault, 1980, p. 60).

Key methodological and epistemological issues do indeed need to be addressed in order to justify the knowledge claims which teachers might make on the basis of their classroom experiences. This does not mean subjecting those claims to traditional forms of validation, as this begs the question of whether those types of validation should go unchallenged. Mishler argues the importance of "trustworthiness" in evaluating research, contending that ultimately the knowledge claims made by any research community reflect what that community agrees to call "knowledge" (Mishler, 1986; cf. Kemmis, 2005). For Mishler, "validation" is a "process through which a community of researchers evaluates the 'trustworthiness' of a particular study as a basis for their own work", involving "tacit understandings of actual, situated practices in a field of inquiry" (Mishler, 1990, p. 415). Polkinghorne (1997) similarly observes with respect to the knowledge claims made by narrative research, in comparison with other forms of inquiry, that "validity is a function of intersubjective judgment", and "rests on a consensus within a community of speakers" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 474). To determine whether a researcher's claims are indeed "trustworthy" or "valid" still presupposes a rigorous analysis of the conditions for making those claims, including the identification of certain protocols for differentiating between them, and comparisons with practices in other fields of inquiry. Freebody comments that "the qualitative educational researcher" is not "engaged in an activity somehow less 'objective', 'empirical', or 'rigorous' than any other researcher in any other discipline" (Freebody, 2003, p.69), and the same should be established with respect to the knowledge claims which teachers and other practitioner-researchers make.

A key working assumption accordingly is that classrooms are complex sites that lend themselves to multiple interpretations depending on the standpoint of the interpreter (a stance that is at odds, therefore, with Phillips and Burbules' [2000] critique of "interpretation"). We conceptualise classroom observation as an interpretive process, which acknowledges the perspectives of those who may see a classroom differently. We also assume the value of enabling practitioners to view their classrooms outside their habitual frames of reference, sensitizing them to the complexities of "framing" and "interpretation", and thereby enabling them to see their classrooms differently (cf. MacLachlan & Reid, 1994; Reid et al., 1996). Paradoxically, this is to abandon any notion that classrooms can be "captured" by employing an array of ever more sophisticated technology, as though an observer can somehow get closer to the "reality" of classrooms by resorting to audio and video recording. This appears to be the claim made by Kress et al. for their "multimodal (semiotic) approach" to classrooms, which they distinguish from "the linguistic approach that has dominated so much research on English classrooms since the 1970s" (Kress et al., 2005, p. 3).

For all the variety of semiotic sources on which they draw, the standpoint from which they construct their accounts of classrooms remains that of the research team. The voices, bodies and practices of teachers are interpreted from the perspective of the researchers, providing at best a somewhat troubling surplus of meaning that threatens to deconstruct their master narrative of "English in urban classrooms". Although teachers might well use new technologies in an endeavour to convey the complexities of their professional practice, the focus needs to be on constructing versions of English teaching that others will find convincing as "socially recognizible evidence" (Ladwig, 1994) and probing the assumptions underpinning such judgments.

CONFRONTING PROFESSIONAL "PRACTICE"

A feature of this approach towards constructing accounts of English classrooms is its supplementation of the more familiar subject-disciplinary focus of research and scholarship in English teaching with an explicit, theorized focus on professional practice as such, as a key reference-point for understanding English teachers' work. This builds on recent scholarship on "practice theory" (for example, Bourdieu, 1990) and what has been called "the practice turn in contemporary theory" (Schatzki et al., 2001), as well as research in and on the professions. We are concerned here with how secondary English teaching is shaped in terms of *both* a subject-disciplinary focus and an embodied, situated professional practice (cf. Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth, 2001)[5].

At one level our aim is to make explicit the "tacit understandings" in the professional discourse in which English teachers participate when engaging in and reflecting on their work. We see this as a key way of enhancing English teachers' capacity to enact what Kemmis calls a "knowing practice", both in "the sense in which a person comes to know what a particular practice is, and in the sense of 'being knowing', which means being aware and self-aware about how things are – a sense that one knows what one is doing when one engages in practice, and reflexively becomes more knowing as one continues to practice" (Kemmis, 2005; cf. Hamilton, 2005; Elliot, 2007, p. 166).

Yet what might be called the "primacy of practice" thesis also requires us to reconsider what we might mean by gaining a better understanding of teaching as a professional practice. By focusing on two supplementary aspects of English teaching (supplementary in the sense that they imply a certain insufficiency or incompleteness in each other), namely its subject-disciplinary focus ("English") and its professional practice, we understand classroom contexts as more than simply sites for transforming content knowledge into pedagogical content knowledge, as though this distinction could ever capture what it means to teach English (Shulman, 1987). The efforts by Shulman and other theorists to anatomize professional knowledge and to analyse teaching in terms of the categories of a consolidated body of knowledge obviously constitute a significant affirmation of what teachers "know" (Shulman, 1987). Yet ultimately the professional practice of teachers and the classroom contexts in which they operate cannot fully be comprehended by any such set of categories. As sites for

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[5] In this regard, our approach connects directly with the ongoing research of RIPPLE, a new Research Institute addressed to Professional Practice, Learning and Education, situated at Charles Sturt University (see http://www.csu.edu.au/research/ripple).

complex interactions between students and their teachers, classrooms resist any attempt to classify what is going on in them, as though they can be frozen in time. What is required, instead, is a logic that posits situations of practice as always beyond our intellectual and imaginative capacities, though not for that reason excusing us from the obligation to try to understand and live our lives fully. To say that lived experience always remains more complex than any set of categories that we might bring to the analysis of it does not mean ceasing in our efforts to try to understand the world around us. On the contrary, such a stance obliges us to engage in continuing inquiry, resisting closure and embracing the possibility of a new ways of thinking and being in the world.

Our focus is not so much on understanding *per se*, or that alone. We are, in fact, primarily concerned with understanding in the service of changing and improving the professional practice of English teachers, of creating the conditions for more productive and (self-)reflexive English teaching. This is obviously quite distinct from a neo-liberal concept of the role that education might play in the knowledge economy, involving calculations of "value adding" against a reified set of performance indicators. We nonetheless remain convinced that the kind of renewed focus on practice which we are envisaging constitutes a significant form of capacity-building that would serve the needs of 21st-century economies, as well as providing a basis for social and personal well-being (that is, for exploring those aspects of identity and community that have traditionally played such a prominent role in English teaching as a professional discourse).

Research needs to be directed towards understanding particular moments and episodes in and of professional practice, embracing both the exchanges between participating teachers and their critical friends as they plan, implement and analyse a series of lessons (as in the comparative research we have discussed at the start of this essay), and then the conversations of a selected group of English teachers in response to the accounts of professional practice co-authored by the teachers and their critical friends. We propose to develop this enhanced understanding in and through dialogue and co-production, involving a team of teachers (as "insiders") and academics (as particular kinds of "outsiders"), both operating within a more or less shared professional discourse. Our focus, in other words, is on practice and its understanding – in that order. That is, our commitment and our interest are as much ontological as they are epistemological.

Much of the work to date on professional knowledge has been on the relationship between knowledge and practice – teachers' knowledge *in*, *of* and *for* their professional practice as teachers. Its focus has arguably been on knowledge – or at least more so than it has been on practice, as putatively the object of that knowledge. This is discernible, for example, in significant work done by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) or Little (2003). Although our approach is located within, and addressing, the territory adumbrated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle's account of "knowledge-in-practice" and "knowledge-for-practice", our overall focus is nonetheless somewhat different. In short, we want to stay closer to the complex "mystery" of what Bourdieu calls "practice in itself" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 40), without, however, assuming that we can refuse or gloss over the challenge of representation. Put simply, in the distinction between what teachers "should know and be able to do", we are

arguing for a focusing on what they "do" – and yet it cannot be "put simply" if we accept the possibility of a "knowing practice".

"Practice theory" (Schatzki, 1996, 2002; cf. Rogers, Erickson & Gaskell, 2007) is as yet little utilised in educational research, more especially in that line of its heritage which references both Wittgenstein and Heidegger. The neo-Aristotelian tradition is arguably more familiar. The passage from Kemmis (2005,) which we quoted at the beginning of this section, is more squarely in this alternative line of thinking. Kemmis is concerned here (and elsewhere) that the persistence of what he presents as "rationalism" in the literature on professional practice knowledge leads to "misunderstandings about the nature of practice"(p. 392). He later suggests that what is needed may be in fact a movement beyond epistemology, or "knowledge". His reference to "how things are" should not therefore be read as a general epistemological statement (still less a marker of the return of an otherwise repressed "positivism"). Rather, it works more in the sense of indicating how, in the midst of practice (being practised), the expert practitioner assesses what is happening at that moment, where one is located or positioned within the unfolding practice at issue, and how best to go on (there is no alternative but to go on). It refers, that is, to the practice as much as the practitioner, and also to the reflexive relationship between the two. How might research hope to honour such complexity, while nonetheless endeavouring to make it meaningful through forms of representation developed in the course of classroom observations and the ongoing conversations between participants?

CONCLUSION

Practice is mysterious – it never happens exactly the same twice, and can never be predetermined or fully predicted or planned (Suchman, 1987). It resists any but the most general extraction of principles framed by dimensions of time, space and purpose. It is always, paradoxically, an empty category – awaiting breath and life to become itself. In this way there is always an *aporia*, an undecidability and an emptiness at the heart of accounts of practice. "Being there" is tied to the same tethers of space, time and purpose – and once we are no longer being in and doing what is entailed in practice, but instead are relating, describing or classifying what went on, it is no longer what it was. To begin with, we are no longer there. This is the tension and paradox of representing practice. It is not a matter of seeking to "capture" the practice of the English teachers with whom we work as researchers, as though practice is something that is simply "there", and that readily lends itself to classification. We want to consider and learn from practice, tracing the ways in which our thinking is bound up with the activities in which we are immersed in our daily lives.

We are working with an emphasis on the primacy of practice, while remaining deeply concerned with what we call the problem of representation – and hence, more generally, the dialectical relationship between practice and representation. This is the standpoint that shapes our continuing work with teachers, in both their actual "practice-ing" and their subsequent accounts of it. This recognition of the complexity of practice provides a basis for a mutually supportive relationship between teachers and researchers, one that hopefully contrasts with traditional understandings of the power relations that inhere within research. Our classroom inquiries require the university researcher to take on a job of work in the teacher's classroom that is

different from, but complementary to, that of the teacher. Neither can produce an account alone. It is the dialogic response to the university researcher's descriptive account of a classroom setting (of the space and the activities in which teacher and students engage in the course of a lesson) that produces in a co-constructed account a sense of the invisible potential of intentionality, of an ultimate "purpose" in the teacher-researcher's actions that we understand as professional practice.

The complexities of teaching practice and its representation are also, therefore, research complexities. How teachers experience professional learning and construct professional knowledge, the forms that such knowledge takes, and the criteria used to judge its validity are research problems. The match (or mis-match) between what teachers actually accomplish and what they were trying to achieve is a research problem. Mediating between radically different viewpoints – most notably the knowledge claims which teachers are able to make on the basis of their teaching experiences and the ways in which researchers have traditionally constructed classrooms – is a research problem. We can no longer work with representations of classroom practice without critically confronting the nature of representation as such, and the conditions for constructing accounts of teachers' work.

The co-construction of the teacher's professional practice, dialogic in nature, emerges from two perspectival accounts – what the teacher-researcher tells and what the university-researcher records. Both are "true", both are "false", neither is complete, and both are partial. We would anticipate contradictions and challenges between accounts of "what happened" (Reid et al., 1996). Bakhtin (1981, p. 282) argues that interpretive horizons never merge but, instead, "come to interact with one another". Rather than knowing relations, we embrace the possibility of dialogue across differences which assumes ethical, aesthetic, affective and embodied relations to the Other. Dialogism, as Bakhtin conceives, it never presupposes a situation in which people reach complete consensus, when what others are saying is fully transparent to them. For Bakhtin, words "lie on the borderline between oneself and the other" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293). One thing which our argument implies for practice is the importance of multiple perspectives. Another is the importance of interrogating the basis of those perspectives as ways of representing practice. Yet another is a recognition that in dialogue, perspectives grow and interact, but need not necessarily merge or produce "consensus" in some final "truthful" representation.

The concept of the dialogue of differences is central to the type of inquiry we are advocating here. It is also tantamount to a position on teaching standards as needing to explicitly embrace heteroglossia within the profession – the differences that are born in the particularity of practices – rather than treating difference as a problem. Standards themselves are not something that are or should be finalized. They should be seen as something that is yet to come, as an ethical code of practice that guides responsible teaching without pretending to pin it down. Standards should not, indeed, pretend to name what accomplished teachers should "know and be able to do", still less prompt regulatory bodies to develop elaborate mechanisms for judging individual performance. This is to remain locked in what "is" (which is already past), rather than embracing the future. Bakhtin distinguishes between a concept of "truth" "that is composed of universal moments" – the assumption that "the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it" – and a recognition of the uniqueness of any situation, as "a given lived-experience" that is happening "*to me* as

the one who is experiencing it" (Bakhtin, 1993, pp. 36-37, italics in original). Rather than seeking to classify particular instances of professional practice as examples of "accomplished teaching", as in neo-liberal examples of professional standards, we should seek to understand how teachers work at the intersection between such general claims and their specific situations of practice.

Such general claims not only take the form of professional standards, but also encompass standardised testing, literacy continua (that is, preconceived "growth points" against which to judge the performance of individual students) and other state-wide mandates or regulatory mechanisms that mediate the professional practice of English teachers within their local settings. This is not to say that we can wish those mandates away. To the contrary, the challenge is to trace the way those mandates shape what we see and do in our classrooms, causing us to focus on this phenomenon rather than just on students' performance and the professional capacities that this might reveal. This means responding to the ethical challenge inherent in Bakhtin's embrace of "a given lived-experience", and accepting our obligation to the others who share this moment with us.

For ultimately the goal for educators is to develop their capacity to respond to the young people with whom they are interacting, and to accept their responsibility to acknowledge the "voices" of those young people. Those voices challenge the reifying categories that schools and other institutions foist on them, taking us beyond what "is" (or what neo-liberalism constructs as the here-and-now), and affirming human life as something that always involves imagination, a sense of what might be, as a matter of "becoming" rather than "being". It is in this sense that we are committed to exploring further the paradoxes of professional practice and the challenge of constructing appropriate and persuasive representations of English teachers' work.

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