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Researching the complexity of classrooms

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In recent years, it has become fashionable to demand of research that it produces 'evidence' that can be turned into easily generalisable findings. Ever more elaborate sets of managerial standards and pre-defined learning outcomes have been imposed, and English teachers are encouraged to see their practice as merely an implementation of 'what works'. What gets lost in such discourse is the messy and wonderfully productive complexity of classrooms and the layered and deeply historied character of the interactions that take place in them. This article considers a different kind of research, one that is clearly located within particular contexts and is always attentive to the lives and capacities of the students and their teachers. At the heart of this article is the collaboration between a university academic and a practising English teacher, a collaboration that is both documented and enacted in *Confronting Practice, Classroom Investigations into Language and Learning* by Brenton Doecke and Douglas McClenaghan.

Keywords: Research; collaboration; social relations in the classroom

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'Teaching is not at present a research-based profession. I have no doubt that if it were, teaching would be more effective and more satisfying'. Thus, setting the tone for much recent discourse around pedagogy, research and policy, begins David Hargreaves' 1996 Teacher Training Agency Lecture. Hargreaves bemoans the lack of 'powerful evidence about effective professional practice' in educational research, in contrast with medical research which he says is 'a type of applied research which gathers evidence of what works in what circumstances' and where 'there is little difference between researchers and user: all are practitioners'. He identifies the 'gap between researchers and practitioners which betrays the fatal flaw in educational research': the agenda is set and controlled by researchers who are for the most part removed from the 'sites of research'. For Hargreaves the 'essential question' is 'just how much research is there which (i) demonstrates conclusively that if teachers change their practice from x to y there will be a significant and enduring improvement in teaching and learning and (ii) has developed an effective method of convincing teachers of the benefits of, and means to, changing from x to y?' Simple. In the fall-out from the lecture, Hargreaves' view of 'scientifically sound data' and the validity of his medical analogy, as well as underlying assumptions about learning, were challenged; there was also a great deal of discussion about these questions:

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What is educational research and who does it?
What counts as 'evidence'?

Confronting Practice, Investigations into Language and Learning (Doecke and McClenaghan 2011) can be seen as an eloquent and elegant response to these questions. It is partly the account of a collaboration between a practising English teacher, Douglas McClenaghan, and a university academic, Brenton Doecke; but there is in the accounts of classroom practice and the more 'theoretical/analytical' passages that frame them nothing of Hargreaves' 'gap' and nothing of the hierarchical positioning that 'teacher and researcher' might suggest. Douglas' school and his teaching are never a source for data and he is very much a collaborator, a co-researcher, not an object of enquiry. The research enquiry into language and learning that the writers describe is clearly located in the nexus of specific histories and relationships between the authors as well as among the teacher and his students.

The book offers a range of powerful and thought-provoking 'evidence', in the form of accounts of situated textual practices in a particular institutional setting, Douglas' school. A teacher 'tells the story' of his classrooms and the complex forms of social networks that mediate the reading and writing activities that take place there. These narratives are, it is suggested, 'a form of textual work, whereby (Douglas) has tried to understand his professional practice more fully'. I would argue that they are also a form of 'research' that speaks powerfully to the wider community. What is particularly impressive is the way these meaning-making practices become a focus for sustained enquiry by both writers. Any interpretation of what is happening in the classroom is offered as 'provisional' and readers are prompted to reflect on how their own values and beliefs shape any reading of the examples of classroom activity. Interpretation is all. In other words, there is a sense in which this kind of evidence is antithetical to Hargreaves' model and to the rhetoric about evidence that is a feature of the policy environment, in Australia and in Britain, where 'scientific' or 'objective' inquiry is located in a realm quite separate from values and certainly from pedagogy.

The authors situate their accounts of classrooms within a model of enquiry exemplified in the work of James Britton, Douglas Barnes and Harold Rosen. By emphasising the complexity of life in classrooms those writers gained insights into the social nature of learning and they encouraged teachers to make space for students to tell stories about their lives. 'To write stories as a way of enquiring into teaching and learning is to foreground the centrality of interpretation, to acknowledge that teaching and learning are inevitably mediated by values or ideology.' (Medway 1980, 25)

Particularly in the work of Harold Rosen, students and teachers are encouraged to see their own experiences, their own cultures, as a source of value and interest and to believe that they are themselves capable of articulating this. Central to the value of this process of articulation and interpretation is the move towards a kind of reflexivity with respect to the teachers' and students' narratives that comprise Doecke and McClenaghan's study. This latter point is important. The authors are careful to insist that it is the work of textual interpretation that makes a notion of narrative enquiry powerful: narrative and language mediate experience. In telling and writing stories, the authors, as much as the students, must weigh up the meaning of events and how they might be seen from different viewpoints.

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The book does not deal in the kinds of large-scale scenarios and generalising narratives about 'good practice' or professional expertise that frame so much of the standards-based reform currently shaping the day-to-day practices of teachers and their relations with students. The 'data' are detailed and multi-layered accounts of classrooms where Douglas teaches. The narratives are about students' creativity and they all 'presuppose a capacity to learn from students'. It is the irreducibly social character of learning as well as the situated nature of the examples that consistently resist the generalising logic of externally imposed professional standards. These narratives focus on how the experiences the students bring with them to class are mediated by the rich semiotic resources available to them. Literacy is conceptualised and practised as dialogic, social, inextricably related to the out-of-school cultures of the students. The questions that follow once this is accepted are these: what opportunities are there for students to draw on these cultural resources and how are prior knowledge and previous experiences acknowledged? There is for both authors an ethical dimension to this view of teaching that underpins all the descriptions of the students' work: teachers need to see out-of-school identities as integral to the students' identities within the classroom. This must be the starting point for any serious consideration of how the 'everyday knowledge' that students bring with them enables them to engage with school knowledge, with Vygotsky's 'scientific concepts'. At the same time this everyday knowledge can transform and organise the curricular knowledge of schooling as we see in so many of the examples in the book.

Students are reading and writing crime fiction that they share with each other on Facebook. A Year 10 class read *The Short Stories of Tobias Wolff* and create both stories and films from their reading. One group of Year 11 girls respond to their study of Hitchcock's *Psycho* with a Karaoke-accompanied 'performance' about Norman Bates to the tune of Abba's 'Mama Mia' (you need to read it). The creativity that characterises the work discussed is something more than individual ability: it is often 'completed' only when it is made public and peers respond to it. Creativity includes borrowings from other texts as well as work in multimedia forms and is often 'shared' among a group of students and their teacher. More than this is the way such creativity is grounded in a particular institutional setting and mediated by that setting:

> The writing and other compositions that Douglas' students produce only have meaning because they are anchored within social relationships that constitute their everyday lives. Their experiments with texts and textuality are integral to their attempts to negotiate those relationships. They are composing for an audience that is similarly driven by an impulse to ask questions about life as it presents itself to them, and to test the capacity of the semiotic resources they have at their disposal to answer those questions. (91)

I want to focus on two examples of the kind of 'evidence' on show. Each in its way says much about the meticulous, layered subtlety of the authors' presentation and interpretation of their data.

The first of these captures the complexity of the meaning-making practices that go on in a classroom where students are able to draw on a range of cultural resources as they 'write', in the knowledge that their teacher is both an interested and a 'critical' reader of their writing. It is both the text itself, a 'poem' about alcoholism from a 14-year-old student, and her teacher's responses to it that are significant here. In that spirit of critical inquiry into one's own pedagogy that characterises so much of this book, Douglas offers his initial response to Sue's

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poem, a response that is expressed in the language which English teachers use to evaluate students' work. This language of 'outcomes based assessment' that would look for evidence that Sue has produced a piece of writing which 'reflects on values and issues in ways that are interesting and thought-provoking for a specified audience' (from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2000 – it could be from our own. . .) proves inadequate for both describing the form in which Sue submitted her poem and for responding to the writer herself in ways that might enable her to develop a reflexive awareness of her own meaning-making practices through genuine dialogue with her teacher. The 'piece of writing' Sue submits is a papiermâché bottle glued to a piece of cardboard with the text of the poem forming part of the background. It is worth quoting Douglas's description of the bottle:

> The maniacal face conveys madness and cruelty with its crazed eyes, fearsome blood-spattered mouth and shark-like teeth – an impression which is enhanced by the fact that the papiermâché model is thrust into the foreground, thus creating a 3D effect. The monster is raising its arms in triumph, and in its left hand it holds a hapless victim – a teenage girl, both as a trophy and a warning. When Sue presented her model to the class, students took in all these details, spending as much time pondering its visual features as reading the written text in the background. Lower down, Sue has drawn other characters representing a world in miniature. People are lying around insensate amongst spilt and broken bottles, and what looks like their own vomit. There is an upturned car. The text constructs an image of social activities that centre around binge drinking, and in the background the characters lose their individuality, embodying an anonymous mass. The text is 'in your face', but it steps back from preaching or crude moralising. Sue has managed to convey a powerful impression of the social world of teenagers and the risks that young people take. (28–29)

Douglas' detailed description of what he calls a 'hybrid, multimodal text' that is also a physical object is accompanied by colour photographs of Sue's completed project. The effect is powerful and the tone celebratory: he clearly values this poem for the way it shows the range of 'semiotic resources that students utilize when they are given an opportunity to do so' and for how this enables them to 'make their informal knowledge of popular cultural practices explicit'.

But the analysis goes much further than the celebration of an alternative, unconventional form of writing. There follows an account of several workshop sessions the authors have run with Sue's work as the focus. What is striking is the range of responses in the workshops and how far teachers felt in a position to make informed professional judgements about the significance of Sue's text 'without resorting to the summative judgements' of the kind that have shaped teachers as 'readers' of students' work. One teacher says the poem works at a 'surface level'; another that it was clichéd and derived from television, and another sees the work in the context of her own school where drug addiction and abuse were part of the 'life worlds' of many of her students. It is the 'deeply situated nature of our professional judgements' that the authors want to emphasise. The workshop

> provided an opportunity to identify the ways in which people's judgements are mediated by larger traditions of inquiry and accepted understandings about curriculum and pedagogy . . .. This kind of inquiry demands a rigor that is equal to the kind of rigor reflected in scientific inquiry, involving a capacity to make judgements based on the details presented in the text (to engage in a 'close reading') but also to step back from those judgements and make them an opportunity for scrutiny. (31–32)

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Such enquiry is also light years from Hargreaves' notion of 'evidence for what works'.

The second example comes from a section called 'Re-thinking "Personal" Writing' in Chapter Five. It is an account of Douglas working with a student as she writes 'a narrative with a surprising, twisted or problematic ending'. Sarah writes about a pop concert that she and her friends have been looking forward to for weeks: 'the ultimate concert' she calls it, from the band 'that everyone worshipped'. This concert 'turned out to be very disappointing' for Sarah and leaves her feeling disconnected from the event, cut off from the music culture that is so important to her and her friends. The conversation with Douglas about her initial draft is characterised by the most careful and attentive listening from a teacher who is keen to respond to what the student has written, to understand what it is she intended and perhaps to suggest other ways of reading, other ways of writing. Douglas writes:

> Part of my response to Sarah's first draft was to talk with her about how she had interpreted the task. Our discussion, however, soon raised other possibilities, relating both to the task itself and to this particular piece of writing. Although we discussed the requirements of the task as I'd originally set it, we also found ourselves considering alternatives that had been opened up by what she had done, apart from the question of whether the writing satisfied my original criteria. In my view, a teacher's initial response to a piece of writing should always draw out some of those possibilities. (66)

In discussion with Douglas, Sarah is able to look at the 'I' of her story and articulate how she wants to suggest a distance between that person and the writer she knows she is. Douglas' 'intervention' comes from a teacher's sense of 'what the writing might become' but always with a respectful attention to what he thinks Sarah wants to do with this very 'personal genre' as she grapples with the contradictions between her sense of self and the competing claims of her relations with others and her place in the world.

Sarah's 'personalised recount', the whole 'process writing pedagogy' tradition that encouraged and celebrated this kind of writing and in which Douglas' particular form of intervention is an important element has of course met with considerable resistance from a group of critics based in Australia associated with 'genre pedagogy'. To writers like J.R. Martin, Frances Christie and Joan Rothery, Douglas' work with his student is 'unfocused conferencing', and they are equally dismissive of a number of examples from classrooms where there is 'a lack of generic focus given by the teacher to the negotiation', and where the students are allowed to choose their own topics so end up 'just writing and wandering around' (Martin, Christie and Rothery, cited in Reid 1987, 72). The teacher, they insist, needs to emphasise the *social purpose* of the writing and the ways in which this is realised by a particular genre. More than this: certain forms of knowledge are best conveyed in particular generic forms. If, as they argued, genres play a key role in mediating social relations, then teachers should be scaffolding students into what they refer to as 'powerful genres'. For Martin and others, children should be encouraged to move from narrative to factual genres, that is to writing 'which is not about what happened but which is about the way things are' (Martin 1985/1989, 5). Martin argued in his influential book *Factual writing: exploring and challenging social reality* that 'all narrative writing is limited' because it prevents the writer from generalising beyond particular experiences and, he insists, 'it is factual genres that enable us to go beyond particular experience, in order to interpret and understand'.

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> Factual writing is designed not to amuse us, but to explore the world around us. It focuses on how things get done, what things are like. So successful factual writing is about the world; it is not primarily intended to entertain. (9)

There are many problems with this approach to the 'purposes' of writing: one is the way it has tended to privilege an increasingly narrow range of writing and reading practices as indicators of pupils' literacy abilities. In Australia in 2008, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was implemented in all schools. Every year on the same days children are assessed using national tests in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy. The results are then published by state and territory. The picture here is a familiar one to teachers in England, where there has been a long history of attempts to measure 'performance' against abstract scales of improvement and then to hold teachers and schools very publically accountable for 'success' and 'failure' in relation to these scales. In Australia, there was an alarming development in this year's Writing Test: a *persuasive* writing task was introduced in place of the previous *narrative* task.

> The change to the persuasive genre was approved by ministers in 2010 following extensive piloting. The new NAPLAN Writing genre was introduced to avoid a narrowing of the curriculum through a disproportionate focus on writing narratives at the expense of other genres.

In an eloquent critique of this view and its origins in those earlier debates about 'powerful genres', the authors of *Confronting Practice* show how the work students produce can challenge the hierarchy of school genres. In sharp contrast to the views of many of the advocates of 'genre' who argued that too much emphasis on 'narrative' and 'expressive' writing denied pupils access to the most powerful written genres, those that are most distant from oral modes, the authors offer numerous examples of 'personal writing' where the first person voice and created persona or the imagined fictional character are ways for the writers to examine in sophisticated ways their own social and cultural making.

Another problem with a pedagogy based on a highly circumscribed range of genres, conceived of as a set of rules that should be followed, is that it omits the agency of the pupils who will make sense of things (and texts) on their own terms.

In an earlier issue of *Changing English* (14, no. 2, 2007) I wrote about a student teacher who met this 'agency' as a kind of mischievous, carnivalesque disruption of her attempt to teach 'ballads' to a group of 13-year-olds. In England, ideas about 'genres' were imposed through our National Literacy Strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998), largely by means of a set of 'text level' writing objectives for different age groups that correspond to different genres. In keeping with the instruction that both teacher and students should be 'aware of the purposes of their writing', Sarah, the student teacher, has made it clear that a ballad is 'writing to imagine, explore and entertain'. In reading a selection of traditional ballads with pupils, she wants to highlight how a ballad needs to 'structure a story with an arresting opening, a developing plot, a complication, a crisis and a satisfying resolution'.

What happens when Sarah attempts to teach the unit on ballads, with its goal that the pupils should write one of their own, is partly the story of what happens in any classroom when actual writers, with their own 'social purposes', meet contrasting or competing pedagogies. When it is time for the pupils to write a

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ballad of their own, four boys – aggressive, powerful, resistant – ask if they can work together and Sarah nervously agrees. What they produce surprises and delights the rest of the class. (The boys insist on reading it aloud to an attentive audience.) Sarah's own response is more complicated and leads her to question some of the principles on which the whole exercise has been founded. The boys' poem shows that they have certainly understood the 'structure and linguistic features of the text type', specifically, the ballad *Frankie and Johnny*. But they have hijacked the exercise to continue a long-running unofficial struggle for power in the official public forum of the classroom. The object of this battle is a particularly popular and successful boy, who becomes in the ballad the focus of a racy melodrama involving love, betrayal, jealousy and revenge.

Whatever the intended purpose behind the writing, the boys have used it as a means for regulating and taking control of their social relations with each other and with the teacher. They enjoyed the exercise not primarily for the opportunity it offered for 'telling an exciting story' but for the individual and social purposes behind the text, a working out of classroom power relations. Being able to write within the framework of the ballad's generic conventions is undoubtedly a pleasure, but as much for the licence it offers to 'put one over' on the teacher and her apparent control of the agenda as for any sense of satisfaction that they are meeting the criteria for imaginative or entertaining writing. Their poem most emphatically 'tells an exciting and dramatic story' but for purposes of their own devising, shaped by their own needs. That one of these purposes was to mock another pupil and attack his social dominance is problematic for the teacher, however adept the boys have been in finding 'clear expression in a very appropriate and effective linguistic form' as it says in the Strategy guidelines. What Sarah's experience powerfully demonstrates is that the 'joint activity' of the classroom involves constant negotiation and struggle between competing goals and perspectives.

The authors of *Confronting Practice* are acutely aware of the institutional structures and histories that mediate teachers' work; but they would also celebrate 'possibilities for imagination and play that inhere within any social setting'. Those boys in Sarah's classroom make the curriculum their own, playfully and imaginatively and in unsettling ways. Texts are actively shaped by the writers as well as being produced to fulfil a particular purpose. Doecke and McClenaghan (2011) describe perfectly what has been going on in Sarah's classroom and offer a response to some of the more reductive effects of genre theory:

> Genres mediate social relationships, but they might also be said to be mediated by the contexts of their use. Genres cannot be conflated with the situations in which they are used, as though they always assume the same form rather than being modified or even subverted by people in their dealings with one another. (71)

The writing of both Douglas' student and the boys in Sarah's classroom is what the authors call 'a form of identity work' that is also a powerful form of critique for young people, one that is deeply engaged with questions of 'culture' and 'power' and the material conditions of their lives.

> Throughout the year these students continued to write such narratives, along with texts that assumed other forms, and each time they returned to the first person it was a different struggle. (64)

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Douglas' school is located in a middle-class suburb in Melbourne in an area where he received his own secondary and tertiary education. There are fascinating and touching autobiographical accounts in Chapter Four, 'Autobiographies', one by each writer. Brenton is 12 and his is the story of rejected love against the backdrop of the Murray Bridge Agricultural and Horticultural Show. Douglas is a young teacher in a country school, in love with punk rock. He tries to share his love with his Year Nine and it does not go well. These stories are there partly to capture the ways popular culture shaped the authors' lives, partly to introduce an exploration of some of the implications of narrative and 'personal writing' as forms of enquiry. In presenting the stories and the literary theoretical insights that frame them, the authors provide a rationale for an approach to texts and their contexts that is central to their approach to the students' work. In their claim for the value of such autobiographical writing the authors acknowledge the work of Raymond Williams, who presents his 'life story', not 'as an explanation for the values and beliefs he holds, but as a condition for his engagement in cultural and political issues'. One meaning of 'culture' for Williams is 'a whole way of life'; the other is 'the arts and learning'. I see throughout *Confronting Practice* a kind of productive tension at work in classrooms where these two senses are brought together. In his 1958 essay, 'Culture is ordinary', Williams argues that in any society participants must find common meanings and directions, a process that ensures the society grows, 'made and remade in every individual mind'.

> A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. (75)

Doecke and McClenaghan's book is alive with examples of young people 'making culture', testing in experience those 'shapes, purposes and meanings' that they bring with them to the classroom. They are able to 'make new observations and meanings', supported by a teacher who takes seriously – in the context of contemporary urban classrooms – the cultural productivity of 'ordinary' school students.

What they say about Williams is equally true of the authors and their engagement in culture, politics and pedagogy. This remarkable book speaks eloquently of the complexity of such engagement and the complexity of the work that English teachers do. Doecke and McClenaghan show how 'effective' and 'satisfying' such work can be, and how it simply cannot be captured by the reductive simplicities of Hargreaves-inspired research or 'best practice'.

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