Confronting Practice

Classroom Investigations into Language and Learning

Brenton Doecke & Douglas McClenaghan
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The core of the work is made up of direct quotations, conversations, and observations. These should be seen not as examples of any theory, but as exemplary instances of reality.

Kracauer 1929/1998: 25

Significant literary effectiveness can come into being only in a strict alternation between action and writing...

Benjamin 1928/2004: 444

It’s to do with recognizing that you are always there, that what you discover is always seen, interpreted, heard, experienced by you as you are situated historically in the ongoing, never-stand-still of the social.

Smith 2006: 2

Found Poetry

He observes a strict code
In a league of their own
Mucks up in record time
Keep it clean, no holding back
Successful people walk that borderline
Moments of tension and messiness
Still ticking...
An astonishing momentum shift
In black and white
We want to help
The war has hardly begun

This poem was created by a Year Ten girl as part of a writing activity where I encouraged students in my class to explore how the language available to them in the media might provide a resource for their own writing. I introduced the class to found poetry as the final part of a poetry study that was intended to prepare them for the study of literature during their final years at secondary school (i.e. Years 11 and 12). Most of the work we had done thus far had focused on analyzing poems because the Literature syllabus in the senior years requires students to develop a capacity to respond to the way language is used in poetic texts, showing sensitivity to imagery, rhythm, and other features of poetic language. However, in addition to close reading of this kind, students can also produce ‘creative’ work. This means that they have an opportunity to create their own texts in response to any aspect of the reading they do.
As a bridge from their close reading of texts to their own creative work, I dumped a pile of *Age* newspapers on the table at the front of the room and explained the process of creating found poetry. *The Age* is one of two newspapers published in Melbourne, a broadsheet with a national reputation for ‘quality’ journalism, which styles itself as an alternative to the *Sun-Herald*, a tabloid that features your typical mix of human interest stories with exhaustive coverage of sporting events. I also gave a short talk about Dada, providing some history of the movement’s beginnings and philosophy and then some contemporary examples. I pointed out how we could still see traces of Dada in contemporary culture, including some of the art that they themselves had created at school.

The exercise, in case you don’t know it, involves letting students page through newspapers, cutting out any lines that take their fancy. They are not meant to have a particular meaning or narrative in their heads that guides their choices. They simply choose scraps of language that catch their eye. These might be lifted from any part of the newspaper, and might range from the big bold words of newspaper headlines, to advertising slogans and letters to the editor, to the figurative language of sporting commentary. They can then arrange the language they have found in any order they like, adding extra words, if they so choose, in order to make a poem.

The lesson was a breeze. After my introductory comments, I could have sat back and simply let it happen. A group of able and confident students in the class took to the task with alacrity, one of them even thanking me at the end for a good lesson. The class as a whole was happy to continue with this exercise during the following period. Some put their poems on display by writing them on the white-board at the front of the room for us all to see. This prompted other students to consider different ways of presenting their poems. One girl pasted the lines from the paper she had used on an A3 sheet. Others began discussing the possibility of producing multimedia versions.

Over the next few sessions most students finished with their found poems and moved on to other creative work. However a small group picked up on the idea of an instant poem drawn from the language surrounding them and came up with the notion of ‘overheard poetry’, where you write down phrases and sentences from the conversations you hear around you and turn them into a poem in the same way as with newspaper text.

By using examples of creative work done by students in previous years, I encouraged students to think about how they could present their work to others. I’d picked up on what they were saying about various ways of presenting their work, and I wanted to take the whole exercise one step further by giving them an opportunity to show their found poetry to each other. Some of them had already done this in an impromptu way, when they had written their compositions on the white board after first completing their found poetry, but we were now going to stage an ‘official’ event.

Nearly half the class, working individually or in small groups or pairs, created multimedia presentations, loading them on to my computer. The school in which I work has a purpose-built room for screening films and multimedia. I booked the room and individual students and groups took turns in presenting their poetry to the class. None of the students wished to speak to their peers about their work, either before or after their presentations. I had planned for and encouraged them to prepare a short introductory or concluding speech, but they all seemed to prefer to let their poetry speak for itself.
Other students opted for presenting their poems in print. Kate, the author of the found poem at the start of this narrative, collaborated with two friends to create a large book of poems, which features each individual poem presented on a single page accompanied by visual material. Here is how her found poem appears:

When I first read Kate’s poem, I felt that it conveyed an intriguing sense of the tensions of everyday life, including the regulatory nature of clock time, the pressures posed by deadlines (‘still ticking’) and the perpetual threat of ‘messiness’ or ‘mucking up’. But whatever the merits of her original poem, her decision to present it against a background made up of other language borrowed from the newspapers appears to inject another level of meaning into the text. Where, indeed, is ‘the text’? Rather than being simply an example of found poetry that shows the characteristic features of this genre (whatever those features might be), it now takes on qualities that bring to mind other genres. I felt impelled to identify those features that might give it unity, such as the tension between clock time and dimensions of life that are beyond control, and the impulse towards regulation that appears to be signified by words like ‘strict code’ and the contrast between ‘black’ and ‘white’. But placed against the background of the other newspaper texts, it now appeared to demand a new reading. Indeed, you might say that Kate has returned the words and phrases she found to the shifting context from which they derive, a world of competing discourses where words are merely traces of events and people whose ‘reality’ remains a matter of conjecture. The words of her poem only have meaning within this fragmented, dynamic world of newspaper language, but as a result it is hard to say what, precisely, their meaning might be. This is the world in which Kate herself is immersed, as she has gone about cutting out words that speak to her, without her knowing exactly what those
words mean. The way her poem appears at the edge of the page suggests that her language is both part of and separate from the universe of discourse in which it resonates. It sits near the edge and on an angle, suggesting movement, a text tossed about in a sea of language. Maybe…

I know that I am ascribing a meaning to the text that Kate herself may not be able to articulate or even fully understand. Yet that is partly my point. By allowing students leeway to experiment with texts and textuality, as Kate has done with her poem, you enable them to engage in meaning-making practices that exceed the way school writing is typically produced and evaluated. You also put yourself in a position of learning from what the students create, rather than adopting an evaluative stance that pretends to comprehend and (worse still) measure such texts against pre-determined benchmarks, as with outcomes statements that purport to reflect a certain developmental level. Wayne Sawyer captures the stance I try to adopt as an educator when he writes about the need for teachers to think of themselves as literary critics whenever they read and respond to students’ work, cultivating an openness towards the compositions that students create (Sawyer 2005).

With Kate’s text, I was also struck by the visual qualities of the artifact that she eventually produced, when she placed her found poem against the background of other newspaper language. I was reminded of work which another student had presented to me a couple of years ago, when she chose to present a poem in the form of a papier maché display. As on that occasion, I found myself prompted to think about the nature of multimodality, and the way students engage in multimodal communication whenever they are given an opportunity to do so. Yet it is not just a matter of multimodality, as though this word refers to a decontextualised skill or technological competence. Context is everything when it comes to facilitating students’ writing. We need to relocate ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ within the social practices and networks that shape any English classroom, both the social relationships within the classroom and those which stretch beyond it.

To engage in critical inquiry as an English teacher is before all else to be mindful of the social relationships that constitute any classroom, including how students’ out-of-school social networks and associated semiotic practices might intersect with their lives in school. Kate’s presentation, as well as the other found poetry which her peers created, brought home to me the ways that students are able to draw on a range of semiotic resources in order to make meaning. It showed me how such resources mediate their relationships with one another.
The World We Know

This book comprises narratives by Douglas McLenaghan in which he explores his professional practice as a secondary English teacher in a state school in suburban Melbourne. The narratives derive mainly from his work with students in the upper years of secondary school, namely adolescents around 15-18 years of age. The stories have all been written in dialogue with Brenton Doecke, and they are juxtaposed with stretches of more analytical writing (crafted by both of us) that grapple with issues of curriculum and pedagogy at the current moment. Yet rather than simply providing prompts for such an analysis, the stories can be read for their own sake, as attempts by Douglas to understand the work he does as an English teacher from day-to-day. Readers are welcome to flick through this book and engage in any of the narratives assembled here. Each narrative foregrounds the everyday, conveying a sense of the sights and sounds of Douglas’s classrooms in their rich concreteness. Although they are combined with text that has a more analytical character, they are not simply folded into the argument or used for illustrative purposes. Indeed, we want the stories to resonate beyond our purposes, gesturing towards complexities that remain larger than any explanation or analysis of them.

We situate our work within a tradition of inquiry that emphasizes the way knowledge is always constructed from a certain standpoint. That standpoint is reflected not only in the ideology that a researcher might consciously espouse. Even research that is avowedly conducted in the interests of social justice can be compromised when researchers persist with traditional, ‘scientific’ ways of thinking. Dorothy Smith argues that the very categories that sociologists bring to their investigations – their understanding of social structure, about the nature of class, about the role of schooling in perpetuating social inequalities, about the social processes that shape people’s lives – can produce a kind of misrecognition of the situations and people that they claim to comprehend (Smith 1987). Indeed, their claim to comprehend the people and places they investigate (to offer an ‘eagle’s eye view’ of events, as two educational sociologists have put it [Kenway and Bullen 2001: 6]) is part of the problem.

Smith critiques a mode of inquiry that reads the particularities of people and situations off against pre-conceived understandings of the social world, employing ‘macrosociological’ categories to ‘produce an account of a social process as if it were external to individuals’ (Smith 1987: 129). Her starting point, by contrast, is the richly particular and irreducible character of the everyday, of the here-and-now as it presents itself to people as they live out their lives, from which the complex network of social relations that shape what happens initially remain invisible, a matter for exploration rather than a source of explanation (cf. Smith 1987: 133). Siegfried Kracauer makes a similar point when he differentiates between using the detail of everyday life to illustrate a theory (treating the phenomena of everyday life ‘as examples of any theory’), and attending to the richly specific character of people and events in order to understand what is going on (Kracauer 1929/1998: 25). Large generalizations – typically invoked by language about ‘globalisation’, ‘New Times’, a Post-Fordist economy, or ‘capacity building’ for the 21st century, etc. – by their very nature fail to capture the specific character of local settings. Our starting point is the local setting where Douglas is working, with the world that he and his students enact in their everyday lives. We want to write sentences that avoid the generalizing logic of scenarios about history and society reflected by both neoliberal policy statements and avowedly ‘radical’ critiques of schooling and education.

Douglas uses the word ‘mediate’ in the final sentence of his narrative, and the more we have thought about the complexities of teaching and learning within school, the more we feel that this word provides a key to understanding the social interactions that occur there. This book
explores possible ways of seeing and understanding the social exchanges that take place within classrooms from a teacher’s standpoint. The bulk of Douglas’s narratives focus specifically on how the experiences his students bring with them to class are mediated by the rich semiotic resources available to them in their out-of-school lives. Yet young people’s experiences are not only textually mediated in this sense. Their experiences of schooling have increasingly become shaped by texts of a different sort, namely standardized tests and a competitive academic curriculum. Schools in Australia and other western countries have been subjected to waves of major educational reforms (commonly named ‘standards-based’ reforms [Darling-Hammond 2004]) that have the potential to radically reshape the way teaching and learning are done in schools. Standardised testing, system-wide curriculum reforms, professional standards, performance appraisal – such reforms do not figure in the experiences of students and their teachers as something external to them. Students and teachers alike are caught up in standards-based reforms, and their relationships are mediated by the forms of accountability they mandate. We shall have more to say about this in the next chapter.

The stories and arguments that comprise the following book register moments of critical insight into teaching and learning from inside an institutional setting which has been significantly reshaped by standards-based reforms. They gesture towards alternative ways of thinking about language and literacy, schooling and education, without positing an either/or. We cannot lift ourselves up like Baron von Münchhausen and completely extricate ourselves from the social settings in which we work and the patterns of thought and behaviour into which we have been habituated. The heterogeneous quality of this book is the result of its being located within an institutional setting where the possibility of imagining alternatives to the ways schools are currently organized is often difficult to grasp. Like Douglas’s students, we are drawing on all the semiotic resources around us in an effort to see beyond the here-and-now.

Confronted by the social and economic turmoil of Weimar Germany, Walter Benjamin derided ‘the pretentious, universal gesture of the book’, arguing that only those ‘inconspicuous forms’ – ‘leaflets, brochures, articles, placards’ – were ‘equal to the moment’ (Benjamin 1996/2004: 444). The effectiveness of such literary forms, according to Benjamin, arises out of ‘a strict alternation between action and writing’ (ibid.), prompting people to actively challenge the social conditions with which they are confronted. His contemporary, Siegfried Kracauer, chose to explore the potential of the feuilleton for engaging in an inquiry ‘that crossed the established boundaries between scientific disciplines as well as between journalism, literature and philosophy’ (see Müller-Bach 1998: 9). What these writers offer are ways of ‘writing the social’ (to borrow again from Dorothy Smith [Smith 1999]) that we take as models for our own inquiry. This inquiry is not limited by any preconceptions about the form that the writing should take. We are envisaging, instead, an eclectic use of all the semiotic and intellectual resources available to us.

And – crucially – we are envisaging an ‘alternation’ of action and writing, of vivid accounts of classroom incidents and theoretical analysis, which invites readers to reflect on the conditions of their own work and the possibilities of a cultural politics that might challenge standards-based reforms and the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology.

Kate’s text is a provocative representation of the world in which we find ourselves. It is noteworthy that the newspaper from which she took her language is The Age, and not the Herald-Sun. Whether sensationalist tabloid or broadsheet pretending to offer a forum for the exchange of informed opinion, newspapers convey a sense of immediacy, of being locked in the everyday. We both live in Melbourne, and like all ‘thinking’ Melburnians, we usually begin the day by reading The Age over breakfast. This is as opposed to reading a tabloid like the Herald-
Sun or The Australian, a national broadsheet that is nothing more than Rupert Murdoch’s mouthpiece. But what do we find on the front page of The Age today, that is, at the moment we are writing this text? ’Big Retail to expand tax crusade’ (a report about an advertising campaign by major Australian retailers to end ‘the GST exemption for imported goods worth less than $1000’); ‘Australia gets a Cook’s tour of batting brilliance’ (a glowing account of English batsman Alastair Cook’s ‘189 at the SCG yesterday’); ‘Floods to hit economic growth and put pressure on inflation’ (a report about the impact of the Queensland floods on the Australian economy). These three reports are framed by other information, including details about feature articles inside the paper, such as ‘Top Viewing: What to Watch in 2011’ and ‘Big Hair Days: Hollywood’s obsession with goldie locks’, as well as estimated temperatures for Melbourne and regional cities, a note about the amount of water in Melbourne’s dams (53.7%; A Year Ago: 37.4%) and an ‘Odd Spot’ reporting the death of a thousand blackbirds in Arkansas (they ‘had fallen dead from the sky’) and a similar occurrence in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. What are we to make of these isolated scraps of information? What kind of knowledge do we need to decipher the initialisms or make sense of the other references to life in Melbourne and other parts of Australia? Who really has the capacity to see beyond the world as it is constructed by the daily media? (cf. Haug 1990: 42ff)

Kate’s presentation yields interesting insights into the way our experience of the world is mediated by the language of newspapers. It opens up the possibility of a reflexive awareness on the part of both students and their teachers about the world around us. And it is, indeed, ‘our’ world, a world that offers a common focus for inquiry, a common ‘problematic’ (to use Dorothy Smith’s language once again [Smith 2005: 41]). Any pretence to offer an ‘eagle’s eye view’ of anything has to be greeted with scepticism. Such a claim not only presents a questionable form of knowledge. It also fails to provide a sense of strategy for acting upon the conditions presented to us. Going beyond the immediacy of the present and thinking relationally is a task for both students and their teachers. As Kate’s teacher, Douglas is alert to possibilities that she may only be able to grasp in the most hesitant manner, possessing only the most rudimentary language about language to enable her to fully understand what she has done. Yet at another level Douglas and Kate are both engaging in inquiry into the world they share, and both are learning from each other.

Teacher and student, academic researcher and classroom-based practitioner – this book attempts to transcend such hierarchies by offering an account of sustained, collaborative inquiry into the meaning-making practices in which students engage in classroom settings.

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1. Throughout this book we use pseudonyms to name students, except where otherwise indicated.
2. We discuss this text in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER TWO

CONFRONTING PRACTICE

Lee: The teacher will always want you to write a certain way.
Cara: Yeah, but what’s the point if you all write the same way?

This exchange occurred between two fifteen year old girls who were participating in a focus group discussion about the kind of written work they were accustomed to doing at school. At this and several other moments in their conversation they were critical of the lack of autonomy they were given as learners and the routinised nature of the school literacy practices they were expected to perform. They ventured these comments politely – the discussion had, after all, been initiated by their English teacher, Mr McClenaghan (whose name they typically abbreviated to ‘Mr Mac’). Douglas had told them that he wanted to gain insight into their experiences of school writing, and the unspoken protocol was that this was not an occasion when they could vent about individual teachers or the school they were attending. They were also ‘successful’ students – it is not as though their critical perspective on schooling meant that they were at any risk of dealing themselves out of the game. Yet it remains clear that they had not ‘found themselves’ in the curriculum (cf. Sarland 1991: 101) They had become adept at responding to conventional expectations about what an ‘ideal’ student should be, projecting a certain version of the ‘self’ required for acceptance and academic success (Teese 2000: 4; cf. Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Paradoxically, the very way they were able to articulate their critique of school literacy practices was a sign that they knew what was involved in ‘doing’ school. Their dissatisfaction with the school curriculum and pedagogy they had experienced was nonetheless palpable. They were disengaged from subject English and from their schooling in general. They did not seem to feel any connection between their sense of self or identity and the work they were required to do as students. But it is not just students who have become alienated.

Standards-Based Reforms

The context out of which this book emerges is one that has increasingly been shaped by ‘standards-based’ reforms (Darling-Hammond 2004). As with other countries, Australia has over the past decade or more witnessed a proliferation of government initiatives designed to regulate teaching and learning. The aim – so the rhetoric goes - is to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in the knowledge economy of the 21st century (cf. Doecke, Parr, and North 2008). In Australia, such initiatives date back to at least the early 1990s, when an attempt was first made to introduce a national curriculum. This curriculum took the form of subject ‘profiles’, each organised as a set of ‘outcomes’ that mapped ‘the progression of learning typically achieved by students during the compulsory years of schooling’ (AEC 1994a: 1). Educators were now obliged to review their practice in relation to statements that ‘at level 5, a student uses a variety of text types for writing about familiar or accessible subjects and exploring challenging ideas and issues’, that ‘at level 6 a student conveys detailed information and explores different perspectives on complex, challenging issues through writing for specific and general audiences’, and so on. (AEC 1994b: 106, 122). For a variety of reasons, this attempt to implement a national curriculum foundered, but the language of ‘outcomes’ and ‘standards’ is now common place around Australia.