‘We not I’ not ‘I me mine’: Learning from Professional Memory about Collectivist English Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the Professional Memories of English teachers who began their careers between 1965 and 1975. The teachers began their careers in circumstances that offered opportunities to work in collectivist ways. The teachers’ memories reveal a strong collective identity, a powerful sense of agency and a critical engagement with the aims of English teaching. It is argued that by exploring these memories, and by re-imagining English as a ‘relational’ or ‘heteroglossial’ activity, current practitioners might find inspiration to work collectively and collaboratively to challenge dominant conceptions of the subject.

Key words: Professional memory; history of English teaching; collectivism; collective memory; dialogism; heteroglossia

Recent government interventions have framed the school subject English in divisive and elitist ways (Coultas, 2013), and for years practitioners have been coerced into technicist and functionalist practices (Robinson, 2000). English, of course, is not immune to broader educational developments and discourses, and aggressive marketisation, consumerism and individualism have helped re-define English teacher roles and responsibilities in recent decades. These developments have been intended to re-orientate social perceptions of education away from public service to competitive marketplace. Such interventions seek to efface alternative traditions in education, with teachers, parents and children constrained to compete in this so-called ‘marketplace’. The problems and inequalities of competition and individualism in education are well documented (for example Ball, Bowe & Gerwitz, 1995; Ball, 2008; Burgess, Briggs, McConnell and Slater, 2006; Coffey, 2001; West, Hind and Pennell, 2004; Burgess, Propper and Wilson, 2007). But English has a long history of progressive, sometimes radical, collaborative and collectivist approaches – and valuable lessons can be learned by exploring the Professional Memory (PM) of practitioners from different conjunctures in the evolution of the subject. I carried out research into the PM of English teachers who began their careers between 1965-1975: I will present their stories in this piece. This period offered genuine opportunities to work in collectivist ways. But what circumstances provided the impetus for this?

Following World War Two, lines of work emerged that gave school English a ‘new’ identity. Gibbons (2009, 2013) demonstrates how this new English was significantly influenced by a community of teachers in London, and particularly through the work of the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE). The new model aimed to develop a curriculum that was relevant and responsive to children’s experiences, backgrounds and cultures. And, Gibbons (2009) points out, dissatisfaction with the tripartite system (introduced under the 1944 ‘Butler’ Act), meant London County Council was supportive of the burgeoning comprehensive movement. These circumstances motivated some practitioners to attempt to re-imagine English in more democratic ways. Throughout the 1950s English in some London schools changed radically. Hardcastle and Medway (2013) foreground Harold Rosen’s pioneering work at LATE and at Walworth School, an early ‘experimental’ comprehensive. In the 1950s however, because ‘there had been no comprehensives there had been no English for comprehensives’ (35), Walworth essentially had a streamed system. But Rosen initiated a series of curriculum developments that produced a ‘version of English [that] owed much to the comprehensive school ideal’ (35). Through the collaboration of colleagues at the school and in LATE, a model emerged that challenged existing conceptions of the subject: ‘less about what’s called “methods” than “aims”, what English should be *trying* to do’ (37).

These aims are clear in the course-book *Reflections* (1963), produced by teachers at the school – Simon Clements, John Dixon and Leslie Stratta. The book targeted children’s (mostly working-class) experiences, paying close attention to their backgrounds, cultures and languages. It re-imagined the purposes and aims of English by including provocative texts, ideas for creative writing and images of inner-city environments (Hardcastle, 2008). Compared with the ‘Empire-building, character-forming…gendered stuff of the sort that attracted the scorn of LATE’ (Hardcastle and Medway, 33), *Reflections* was a radical departure from existing models: and it emerged through collectivist enterprise.

The next decade provided English teachers with increasing opportunities to work in collectivist ways; and in 1975 when the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) established The English Centre, practitioners had unprecedented access to resources, publishing opportunities, courses, conferences and spaces to work co-operatively. Forty years on, the Centre still runs independently, and successfully, as the English and Media Centre. However the realities of English teaching in the present conjuncture are very different to those of the 1970s. When the English Centre was established ILEA encouraged collaboration. A network of local Teachers’ Centres presented opportunities to design new ways of working; advisory and inspection teams meant good practice was circulated and support and guidance were available (Lowe, 2007). The English Centre evolved through an organic desire to institutionalise arrangements for creating partnerships between teachers and different schools. It also aimed to put practitioners at the forefront of curriculum development. In contrast, current English teachers are beleaguered by performance management, performance related pay and test-based accountability, making it difficult to maintain a commitment to a co-operative ethos. In such circumstances it is hard for practitioners to recognise the limitations placed upon them, and the relative lack of structured support they have. John Dixon (2013) argues:

But how do teachers under this system learn to improve teaching and learning in their classes? Typically they lack LEA advisers, a teachers’ centre, and any national project. (28)

Not only that. Dixon argues recent curriculum changes ‘squeeze the joy and pain out of any imaginative responses to literature, and crib, cabin and confine any language for life into the unreal world of test questions’ (28). But where do English teachers get the opportunity to debate these issues? And how might it be possible to agitate for a greater voice in defining professional responsibilities, demanding support structures and developing curricula? This has to be a collective endeavour. As Paulo Freire (1976) asserts: ‘We have to make our freedom together with others – “we” not “I”’ (226).

Why collectivist English?

Before examining the informants’ stories I want to stress the importance of a collectivist approach to English from a theoretical perspective. Conceptions of ‘self’ or ‘mind’ have tended to be constructed from an individualist perspective in different traditions. This is true of ‘constructivism’, which Gergen (1999) argues is a tradition where ‘each individual mentally constructs the world of experience’ (236). From this perspective the individual ‘mind’ functions to ‘create the world as we know it’, meaning there can be as many ‘realities as there are minds to conceptualise or construe’ (236). For constructivists the ‘process of world construction is psychological; it takes place “in the head”’ (237). Gergen highlights a key distinction between ‘constructivism’ and ‘social constructionism’:

In contrast, for social constructionists what we take to be real is an outcome of social relationships. This is no small matter, either intellectually or politically. Constructivism is allied with the individualist tradition in the West, the individual mind is the centre of interest. Yet, many constructionists are deeply critical of the individualist tradition and search for relational alternatives to understanding and action. (237)

Both traditions emphasise human construction in the generation of what we take to be ‘real’. However, through a social constructionist lens ‘mind’ and ‘self’ can be conceptualised as collective, social phenomena that are influenced by an intricate mosaic of contexts, discourses and practices (‘relational alternatives’). Gergen (2001) insists it is impossible to escape the influence of historical contexts in the construction of ‘mind’: ‘the historical is the origin of the mental. That is, mental processes – both the ontology of the mind and the specific manifestations – are byproducts of antecedent historical conditions’ (87). Through social relationships individuals acquire models for appropriate types of public performance and utterance, and the templates for these are always historical constructions. Gergen (1999) even insists that what appear to be personal emotions are constructed in this way: ‘We gain much by replacing the image of private “feelings” with public action; it is not that we *have* emotions, a thought, or a memory so much as we *do* them’ (1999: 132). Action and performance are ‘constituents of relationship’ that are ‘inhabited’ by a history of relationships, as well as by ‘the relationships into which they are directed’ (132). From this perspective Gergen makes the radical claim,

There is no creation of an independent mind though social relationships…We don’t have to worry about how the social world gains entry into the subjective world of the individual…there is no independent territory called ‘mind’ that demands attention. There is action, and action is constituted within and gains its intelligibility through relationship. (133)

This does not mean human agency, identity and individuality are dismissed. But in considering who we ‘are’, it is essential to think about how beliefs, values and ideological perspectives are constructed in relation to the various material contexts in which we live. So how does ‘action’, including language use in all its forms, acquire meaning? Various factors influence this – social and cultural contexts, participants, settings and so on. By exploring ‘relational alternatives’ the ‘relational being’ or ‘relational self’ can come to understand how individuality is constructed through the various material contexts they inhabit. And the most fundamental way in which individuals ‘relate’ is through sign systems. External, social action is internalised by individuals and transformed into inner speech: a dialectic and dialogic process. Volosinov (1973) insists that existence can only be made sensible through ‘the material of signs’ (28). And the ‘word’, as ‘the skeleton of inner life’, allows individuals to develop ‘inner speech’. Volosinov insists,

Any psyche that has reached any degree of development and differentiation must have subtle and pliable semiotic material at its disposal . . . that can be shaped, refined, and differentiated in the extra-corporeal social milieu in the process of outward expression. Therefore, the semiotic material of the psyche is pre-eminently the word – *inner speech* . . . Were it deprived of the word, the psyche would shrink to an extreme degree; deprived of all other expressive activities, it would die out all together. (29)

Volosinov argues that individual thought and memory are developed in the transformation from social to internal, through the process of ‘internalisation’. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) insists that all ‘higher’ mental functions ‘originate as actual relations between human individuals’ (57). As such, Gergen (1999) maintains ‘we are all made up of each other’ (138), and conceptualising the ‘self’ as ‘relational’ is crucial for individuals to consider how these processes occur. In terms of English teaching it seems some of these ideas influenced the practitioners who re-imagined English following World War Two. As John Dixon (1991) insists of the time: ‘there had to be a revolutionary break from defining language as reified object, towards observing social processes dependent on signs in use’ (186).

Particularly useful here are Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia and speech genre. Bakhtin (1986) insists all individual ‘utterances’ (verbal or written) contain ‘echoes’ of others’ voices. Individuals act appropriately (or not) in different contexts by drawing on socially constructed templates, or ‘speech genres’, that enable participation. Like Gergen’s ‘relationships’, all utterances are made in response to a history of previous ones, and projected into subsequent ones with intent and expected outcomes. This process is further complicated by the dominant effects of heteroglossia. Human existence is determined by complex dialogic and polyvocal processes that are un-limitable and transformative. An utterance’s meaning is governed by a range of factors (physical, cultural, social, historical) that will vary with context. The continuous interplay of meanings through dialogue sees individual utterances merging with, challenging and re-shaping others’ utterances. For this reason language, and life, cannot be resolved into a single unity: an individualist conception of human consciousness is impossible. As a consequence there can be no ‘monologue’ because it would be ‘cut off from the fundamentally social modes in which discourse lives’ (Bakhtin 1981: 259).

However, dominant social groups frequently use ‘monologic’ discourses to give the impression that one ideological position is closely related to social reality. Bakhtin (1986) argues such discourses are deliberately intended to evoke ‘a silent responsive understanding…with a delayed reaction’ (69), and sooner or later what is heard and understood will ‘find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener’ (69). In this way individuals are debilitated in a continuous struggle between these external, monologic conceptions of reality and the dialogic realities in which they live. Bakhtin insists ‘standard’ languages work in this same monological way. Individuals are given ‘mandatory forms of the national language’ (80) which limit opportunities to engage with the heteroglossial realities of ordinary talk. ‘Standard’ English of course is presented in such monological terms. English teaching is dominated by monological conceptions of curriculum, pedagogy, aims and outcomes: just think of the National Curriculum, various ‘strategies’, grammar tests, Ofsted inspections. Such interventions promote a limited, and limiting, conception of the subject which is ‘cut off from the fundamentally social modes’ in which it must operate. From a ‘relational’ and ‘heteroglossial’ perspective, the aims and intentions of English must emerge from the collaborative voices of stakeholders (teachers, children, parents) who exist in their various material contexts.

For Bakhtin, critical individuals learn how to challenge and repudiate authoritative discourse, taking from others’ utterances ideas that correspond with their own experiences, missions, values. Students in English lessons should develop the skills to critique how dominant discourses are presented; to understand how the narratives they are born into ultimately influence how they story their lives. Understanding these processes makes it possible to restructure dominant narratives to change one’s life trajectory. But this has to be a collective endeavour – an exploration; a negotiation; an agreement.

The informants and the research

Six participants **(**Ann, Michael, Liz, Shaun, Steve, David) were recruited through purposive, convenience and snowball sampling (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). As such they do not represent all English teachers in the period, but might be described as ‘progressive’ or ‘radical’ practitioners. Generating a PM of English teaching is a social process/activity, and the memories presented here emerged through multiple interviews: a collaboration between the informants and me. The memories form part of a larger collective memory (see Halbwachs, 1992; Middleton and Edwards, 1990) of English teaching. Halbwachs (1992) conceptualises ‘historical memory’ as that produced by historians or through officially sanctioned artefacts – portraits, statues and the like. In this way individuals ‘remember’ events they have not necessarily experienced. So how do current English teachers understand the period 1965-1975? In recent decades the historical memory of English teaching has been constructed in ways that deliberately seek to efface progressive or radical traditions; the subject is presented in a monologicial way. The ‘autobiographical’ memory of practitioners, who experienced events themselves, is rarely considered in official versions of English. This piece then, is an attempt to ‘write back in’ the voices of practitioners to the collective memory of English teaching, to offer an alternative account of events.

The PM presented here forms part of a larger project into the informants’ careers so I am selective in my focus. This piece concentrates on informant memories of the support structures and opportunities on offer to them in the period; their memories of collective and collaborative approaches to practice; and critical engagement with broader theoretical perspectives.

The teachers’ stories

The period 1965-1975 was chosen because it offered opportunities for some teachers to work in collaborative ways. It was also book-ended by a number of significant developments. Comprehensivism gained official sanction through Circular 10/65 (DES, 1965), and over the next fifteen years comprehensives grew rapidly, until by ‘1979 approximately 80 per cent of secondary school children attended such schools’ (Goodson, 1983: 21). ILEA was also established in 1965 and it set about producing networks and support structures for its teachers. At the end of the decade, the 1975 Bullock Report promoted a version of English influenced by LATE, and in particular the work of James Britton (Burgess and Hardcastle, 2000). And of course, the ILEA English Centre was established in 1975. So it was in these circumstances that my informants began their careers. The material realities and re-imagined educational discourses of the period seem to have influenced the informants’ professional identities; they represent themselves as collegial and relational agents. Indeed Ann claims she felt part of a ‘definite movement of English teachers’ at the time. Shaun recalls the wider support on offer,

And the other thing that has to be said . . . is that the inspectorate and the advisory system in London, in the old ILEA…was incredibly supportive of teachers in schools. You always had people you could talk to . . . the atmosphere was one that encouraged what I would call good practice, you know, collaborative learning, teachers treating the kids with respect, using their own cultures and their own language, their own conditions to partner the learning process.

This seems to be a particularly ‘heteroglossial’ conception of the subject, with the focus on collectivist learning through a range of contexts. All the informants agree that ILEA offered opportunities for professional development that simply do not exist today. They recall opportunities to develop skills and knowledge beyond the classroom. They foreground collegiality and co-operation in developing new materials, methods and curricula. ILEA ran many courses and Liz recalls a memorable one in the late sixties, run by film director Mike Leigh at the Royal Court Theatre. Like Shaun, she is enthusiastic about the support on offer,

. . . one of the things that was incredibly powerful at the time was that if you were teaching in the ILEA, you had a very strong inspectorate, you had advisory teachers, you belonged to the professional association of each subject . . . And so there was, we, er, you’d go for weekends and courses.

As well as these opportunities, ILEA offered some teachers the chance to gain experience as advisers or consultants. David was seconded as an advisory teacher,

So that was a two year secondment . . . you were lined managed by one of the inspectors . . . but there was a lot of freedom within it. You used to meet once a fortnight and you know he’d come around and there’d be things he’d want me to do or pursue in some of the schools, but equally I could come up and say “I would like to do this, how about it?” and nine times out of ten he would say “yes”. You know, so there was a lot of going round, working with individual English departments, you know supporting them, producing materials, er, helping people implementing ideas and so on, so it was really good. I think it was the best two years that I had really because I had freedom within a sort of really good structure, so you felt supported as well.

David’s comments typify the informants’ views of the support offered. Liz recalls the co-operative atmosphere in ILEA the and relationship between advisers, inspectors and teachers,

And they ran weekend courses, they ran holiday courses . . . and they were *there*. They were in there watching you, they were in there supporting you, er, they were friends, you know can you *believe* that now! Not with Ofsted, they were *friends*! And also they made that, er, because they were so funny . . . it wasn’t a bore to go on a weekend course because it was a social occasion. You met people you liked who were doing what you were doing.

Liz’s comments evoke a sense of belonging and camaraderie. But as well as supporting colleagues on organised courses advisers built networks of teachers from different schools who designed courses they might run for colleagues. David recalls:

When I was an advisory teacher ILEA had a course support unit, so there was a lot of freedom to put on courses you know. If you come up with a really good idea the chances are you’d be supported and you could put something on.

By 1975 this collegial spirit was fostered to a high degree through the ILEA English Centre. The Centre represented an attempt to institutionalise a set of values and working practices that were generated throughout this conjuncture, and which clearly extend well beyond 1975. All the informants recall the Centre offering outstanding opportunities for professional development. But its existence also allowed them to feel part of a larger community of like-minded practitioners. David again,

But I think the real sharing stuff came about when the *English Centre* opened…once the English Centre was established there were centralised courses and a resource base and like thinking people who you could get together and work with.

Another teacher who had been attending ILEA and LATE courses and meetings throughout this period is Michael. He recalls a meeting with some illustrious LATE members in 1971,

Yeah, ok, er, but they obviously recognised me as teacher with some energy, so I was invited to a committee meeting, extremely daunting, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Jimmy Britton, Harold Rosen were all there and they were saying “well what should we do? Should we plan a programme?” So I said “well, you know, should we focus on teaching in the inner-city?” in the association, you know. So they said, “well go and organise it then”. So I got a group I knew and we organised this series of conferences called *Teaching London kids* at Holland Park School. And I would say that on average, there were three to four hundred people came to each day, I can’t remember. And they were, as the result of, you know, all the kind of workshops and the interest in new writing and new thinking about education, we started a journal called *Teaching London Kids*.

It seems that active, critically alert teachers had networks and institutions that enabled them to influence the identity of the subject. The number of attendees at the Teaching London Kids (TLK) conferences is remarkable – especially on Saturdays. *TLK* became a successful magazine, and although its remit went beyond English teaching, it had regular features on literacy, reading, writing, sometimes publishing student work. It also located educational practices into a range of social, cultural, political and ideological contexts. With his colleagues, Michael contributed to a heteroglossial conception of English – both in terms of dialogues around curriculum content and approaches to practice. In 1975, after seven years as a classroom teacher and being a member of the editorial board of TLK, Michael says he found himself in the position of running ‘the English Centre for the whole of the ILEA, I mean two hundred schools.’ He describes the possibilities for developing and publishing resources, and the Centre’s potential to influence practice on a wider scale,

So you were enabled to effect change by the kind of courses that you ran and the way you treated teachers . . . Because there was no established curriculum there was a heyday . . . with its relative freedom and there was a different set of professional practices around the work you did . . . So, you know, teachers come in the evening, a lot of the work was, a lot of the work we published was done by teachers in groups in workshops. So yeah, you were able to, to make changes . . . And, er, it’s hard now, isn’t it hard to identify how things change, because as a teacher I’d never experienced any of the national curriculum, or, or anything. So it was very open to us, which was why professional associations were relatively vibrant places, because that was the place where you, you know, shared your ideas about teaching and made new materials and used new texts.

Michael suggests some teachers were critical, active agents of change, who influenced curriculum development, attended courses, shared working practices and published teaching ideas. Opportunities for collaboration proliferated with the English Centre and the other informants took them up enthusiastically. David co-produced a number of publications and recalls the professional satisfaction this gave him,

I mean in terms of practical stuff, just look at the materials that came out of the English Centre, I mean a lot of that stuff is still around. And that, I mean, *that* sort of empowered people to sort of, to contribute and write stuff. I mean I was involved in several things there, you know, you got together with a tremendously exciting and really good group of people, you know with lots of ideas and you were just empowered to do it.

David highlights the collective here, togetherness, the group, as well as the sense of agency created for him and his colleagues. There is also a sense of excitement, creativity and critical engagement with the job of English teaching. Shaun is equally positive, and he recalls one course that fostered the same sense of criticality,

I mean it was an explosion of collaboration at the English Centre in the old days, I think it’s changed dramatically now . . . But in the old days it was brilliant you know, the English Centre was fantastic at running courses . . . I remember in particular one of the advisers set up a group studying, there had been English teachers studying the issue of gender, and we did one on class . . . we had feminist speakers and they debated with us as teachers, how can we ideologically relate these issues in the classroom. It was fantastic, schools from the local areas, teachers from local areas, and it was fantastically supportive and very, very helpful.

Shaun also highlights the vibrancy of the collective, and he relates his experiences to broader discourses, ideological and theoretical perspectives. By 1975 some early pioneering LATE members were working at the Institute of Education (for example Nancy Martin, Harold Rosen, James Britton), and their work began to influence some practitioners (5 of the 6 informants were postgraduate students at the Institute). Theoretical ideas about children’s agency, ‘growth’, writing, language and ‘diversity’ influenced broader discourses around the subject (see for example Dixon, 1967; Britton 1970; Rosen 1972). Some practitioners attempted to put these ideas into practice. However, it seems only certain *types* of teacher did this, as David suggests,

I mean the two centres for English teaching are . . . the Institute and the ILEA English Centre. And they were really important because you know they were places that you could go to and you met, er, teachers you know, I don’t know how you categorise it, but left-leaning or liberal people you know and, so for those who did feel isolated in their schools, it was the opportunity to network with other people of, er, of a like mind and sort of throw ideas around, work on stuff, collaborate, you know so you didn’t re-invent the wheel in every school, sharing stuff.

Circumstances offered possibilities for teachers to form collectives interested in exploring alternative practices. Teacher-led development was genuinely achievable, which Dixon (2013) claims ‘derived its creative energies from the democratic aspirations that followed WW2’ (24). Some teachers with ‘democratic aspirations’, maybe ‘left-leaning’ ones, challenged the conditions demarcating practice and sought alternatives. The structures and opportunities offered by the ILEA English Centre, Institute of Education and LATE made a significant contribution to the informants’ identities as English teachers. It might be that current practitioners can agitate for the same kinds of support and opportunities in current contexts?

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I asked Ann if her early experience teaching English in the late 1960s had been isolated,

No, no. That’s exactly what it *wasn’t* . . . I joined a department of twelve to fifteen. It was team teaching in a block that was an English block, so we had a suite of rooms. There were doors, but they were never shut. So you never taught in your own little empire, you never took sole control, nor in a sense did you ever take sole responsibility. And what was very nice on both those counts, it was a shared responsibility, shared planning enterprise, it was shared delivery. There were choices, there were options, both for the students and for the teachers, but it was bloody hard work.

The team worked closely, having planning meetings *every* lunchtime focussing on curriculum development for different year groups; a different team member took responsibility each day and the head of department was ‘just another teacher’ in the team. The department worked on a language-across-the-curriculum policy that appears similar to the one described by Medway in *Finding a Language* (1980). Ann describes the work as ‘very intensive’ and she struggled having to lead teachers, ‘many of whom had *many* more years of experience and much more confidence than I had in terms of teaching, but you got stuck in and you did it!’. The collegial atmosphere however meant she ‘very quickly climbed to a point of confidence, and had a thoroughly good time out of it’. The school was a working-class comprehensive and Ann suggests some students had difficulties, especially in terms of oral work,

Er, and I think for many of the students, you can imagine in general terms, the backgrounds of many of those students . . . many of them weren’t encouraged to talk and to have social interaction of the sort that *we* were expecting from them. So I think to many of them it was very difficult, er, initially, but a sense of, er, a sense of *empowerment* er, I think was evident in many of them as time went on.

Ann claims language activities were designed to equip students with skills to engage critically with different discourse types. It seems broadening horizons was more important than ‘correctness’ in language study. Again this points to a heteroglossial conception of the subject. This was not the case for all the informants however. Shaun’s first school in 1972 was one ‘where the teachers told the kids what to do. It was very very rigid, hierarchical and backward’. He struggled to find ‘like-minded teachers’, so he ‘met up with teachers from other schools and developed, as I said, this trade union consciousness and political consciousness’. In 1974 he moved schools and discovered colleagues who were ‘more sympathetic politically’. As a result, ‘there was scope to develop, er, your own structures in the school’. Indeed, Shaun claims it was ‘dead easy’ to ‘set up a curriculum group’ to consider different approaches – ‘we collaborated between subjects, setting up all sorts of different models of teaching’. Crucially, he recalls how he and his colleagues located their work into wider social and political contexts to develop radical new initiatives,

One of the first things we did, very early on, was develop a curriculum group, which met voluntarily after school, and we would discuss ways in which we wanted to reshape the curriculum – especially in English and Humanities. And that was a precursor to, probably our finest achievement, which was we were the first school to establish a non-racist policy, er, in ’77, which was years before the ILEA adopted similar policies . . . So, you know, we were able to develop those practices, and those practices were developed in, er, with developments in the outside world.

Another informant, Steve, also connects his English teacher identity to his wider political perspectives. Looking back, he says he was consciously aware of the connections between his political and professional identities: ‘So it was quite interesting and there are definite links between how I saw myself as a teacher and the kind of priorities I had in my political life, definite links.’ Steve eventually left teaching and claims one of the reasons is because of the dismantling of wider support structures and opportunities to work collectively,

What we used to have were self-referencing professional groups, like our own English teachers’ association, our trade unions, our local drama groups, links with parents. I mean there were intense layers of accountability, it was massive. There were local inspectorates for example. You had your own departmental structures in schools, you were constantly being looked at and examined, but it was all internal. And we’ve shifted and so what’s happened is that people like me have gone.

Steve also refers to camaraderie among English teachers, and his sense of the collective appears linked to politically radical ideas. His comments about ‘internal accountability’ allude to clashing ideologies around teaching that emerged throughout the 1970s. Steve claims it is crucial for English teachers to ‘self-regulate, individually and collectively, to set a standard that is unimpeachable’, but ‘that idea has been demolished by external accountability’. And in current contexts, with centralised control over all aspects of teachers’ work, Steve claims teachers are ‘assessed on things that are then extremely low level, so it’s quantities, systems and thing like that that are explicitly unintellectual’. So how did these circumstances occur?

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s English teachers were frequently presented as insurgent or seditious. Cameron (1995) argues debates around English teaching were ‘presented to the public liberally garnished with scare stories about falling standards among pupils and ideological subversion among teachers’ (89). In 1978 Grace claimed ‘anarchy is seen to be realised’ in comprehensive schools ‘in the form of progressive education’ (67). Responding to *Black Paper* criticism of progressivism (see Cox and Dyson, 1971), and Rhodes Boyson’s *The Crisis in Education* (1975), Grace argued that ‘English Departments in inner-city schools’ were ‘particularly singled out as a context for extremists’ (70). It is interesting, now, to consider Grace’s interpretation of these circumstances,

The teacher in the contemporary inner-city school is, as his predecessor was, at the focus of an ideological struggle concerned immediately with conflicting notions of appropriate educational experience for working-class children and more widely with socio-political issues. A conservative critique calls for the restoration of ‘standards’, ‘discipline’ and ‘structure’ and insists that the central activity of schools and teachers is the advancement of learning, not socialisation, community regeneration or political consciousness. (1978: 86)

Of course as human activities educational practices mean all teachers remain the focus of an ‘ideological struggle’, and ‘discipline, ‘structure’ and ‘standards’ remain very much at the forefront of conservative critique. But it seems that a collective desire to locate English into a range of contexts, into children’s own realities, into ‘the fundamentally social modes in which discourse lives’, is missing in current conceptions of the job? Whitty (2002) highlights another damaging myth that emerged in the 1970s, which insisted teachers had abused their ‘licensed autonomy to the detriment of their pupils and society’ (66). Again, Steve dismisses this idea and foregrounds the collective to demand a re-conceptualisation of events,

So the idea we had complete, or individual, autonomy is ridiculous because to start with there’s a team . . . so there was an intense relationship between English staff in a way that possibly was unusual in other departments. There was a sub-culture that was strong socially, creatively . . . there was a strong teachers’ association . . . so the idea of work and autonomy needs to be unpicked a little and historicised. It’s one of the right wing’s, the reactionary gang’s mythologies.

These informants’ stories foreground a collectivist, relational and critically alert approach to English teaching. They highlight collaboration as a crucial ingredient in defining the aims of the subject – ‘what English should be *trying* to do’. Further, they demonstrate how some practitioners attempted to link practice to ‘developments in the outside world’, as Shaun puts it. From this perspective it is possible to challenge monological conceptions of the subject. In learning from PM it might be that current practitioners can generate collective missions and motivations that help them re-imagine English and their own roles in current contexts?

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All the informants suggest they engaged critically with new theoretical perspectives to improve practice and student experience. I asked David if he thought his generation of teachers had a lasting legacy. He said,

I think the legacy if anything, I think it’s, well I *hope* it’s a willingness to engage with theory, er, with new theory and seeing how, you know, does this have anything to say to us? Does this, er, is this actually going to influence what we actually do with kids in the classroom? And, er, you know, and if it does, a willingness to change, er, to change not only your ideas but your practice. And I think, er, you know, it’s the openness to those sorts of ideas that’s the key thing for being an English teacher, that’s it there.

Engaging with theory is a collaborative act – in terms of engaging directly with theoretical ideas, but also in subsequent discussion about how best to interpret and use them. David recalls ‘there was a group of us in ILEA who met regularly and we did things about . . . how can we use literary theory to inform what we do in the classroom?’. It seems that thinking of new ways to engage and challenge students was a priority for these teachers. Liz claims she wanted ‘to get the rejected writing’, to ‘give them a voice’. She refers to Holbrook’s *English for the Rejected* (1964) as her inspiration for this. Ann makes similar claims, but connects this with a wider collectivist perspective,

I think that was very much one of the values at the time, that we, and I’m talking we as a body of English teachers I think, felt very militant indeed on the business of, you know, the *failed* pupil, the *rejected* pupil.

In order to create a fairer, more socially just experience for students, the informants were prepared to invest time and effort, to attend courses and struggle with new ideas. They also took advantage of opportunities on offer. Dixon (2013) claims developments in curriculum and assessment in this period owe much to this kind of organic, ‘participant-led’ endeavour. The informants recall different theoretical perspectives that influenced them. Here is Michael,

Well, er, sociologists had a big impact, you know. I mean people like David Hargreaves, er, looking at the effects of banding in secondary schools, er, which was a huge influence in thinking about, er, agitating for mixed ability and stuff. Nell Keddie and Michael Young and those people in the new sort of sociology were helping us understand the relation between knowledge and how different classes took on that, er, er, knowledge.

Understanding how children’s social and cultural backgrounds influence learning abilities and the acquisition of knowledge is a strong theme in all the informants’ memories. The 1975 Bullock Report famously asserted children should not be expected to ‘cast off the language and culture of the home’ (286) when entering classrooms. Steve claims Bullock was ‘a really quite commonly owned book by English teachers’. However, he also claims ‘nowadays I would be *astonished* if any English teacher had ever read anything produced by the government’. He explains how these ideas influenced his approach,

What lots of us wanted to do was to connect children’s learning with the learning of their parents. And to use life histories, and life experiences and community language as a main source for what you might call classroom products. And to produce our own literature, and we did develop this and community organisations initiatives.

Steve foregrounds the collective again: ‘us’, ‘we’, ‘our’. He also conceptualises the subject in a heteroglossial way, with real contexts, experience and community as essential ingredients of classroom interaction. Despite drawing on different ideas, all the informants express a desire to use theory in practical and meaningful ways. Shaun claims this was encouraged by the likes of Rosen, Martin, Britton and Dixon,

The thing about all of those people then, they encouraged teachers to become their own theoreticians, they had some grasp of the organic intellectual, er, intellectual development arising *out of working practice*.

Current practitioners do not have this encouragement, nor the support structures and opportunities on offer between 1965 and 1975. Liz argues it is crucial to learn from the past, and for teachers to theorise their practice:

I think there’s a need probably for more teachers to be encouraged to contribute to things like the *English Magazine*, er, and if English teachers are teaching reading and writing they should be encouraged to write about their work a little bit more so that you’ve got an archive, a national archive. And that would help people leave good stuff behind . . . I mean in some ways that demonstrates some of the things that seem natural to sixties teachers isn’t there anymore, that *now* *matters*.

If English teachers can communicate and collaborate more freely, initiate dialogue through their writing, through meetings, conferences and the like, then it might be that a new, organic, conceptualisation of the subject can emerge through this collective endeavour? Current models of English are monological, elitist, and ultimately ignore the heteroglossial realities of language in use. What a new conceptualisation of English teaching might look like remains to be seen, but Steve’s suggestions point to a collectivist, heteroglossial one:

Well one of the things that I think is important is that at the core of all English teaching there needs to be an explicit study about the growth and development of language. Not as an add-on, as a kind of small topic-based thing, but it needs to be actually the underpinning and unifying agent of the whole English teaching. So that we can see language as something in flux, that’s multi-national, that’s dangerous, that’s controlling, that is a social and historical construct. So that when we look at the way we speak and write and communicate, it’s seen as part of the flow of time. Now that would be a radically different way of organising the curriculum content in English than that which is sanctioned and legitimised now.

So what might we learn?

These memories offer a much needed, alternative conceptualisation of English – in terms of practice, teacher agency and wider support structures. The teachers present themselves as energetic, critically alert and capable. They highlight a strong sense of agency and autonomy, aided by the collectivist structural support they had early in their careers. They foreground critical engagement with the subject and a desire to explore and incorporate new theoretical perspectives. They highlight the fundamental necessity of theorising one’s own practice – maybe even publishing the results. Mostly though, they demonstrate a model of English as a collectivist endeavour.

Conceptions of professionalism obviously change over time, but official interventions in recent decades have eroded teacher autonomy and agency. Indeed, some have argued teaching can barely be considered a ‘profession’. Hargreaves (2000) defines four distinct periods following WW2 that changed conceptions of professionalism. The 1960s/70s saw ‘autonomous’ and ‘collegial’ periods that the teachers in this study have highlighted. However, teachers currently operate in a ‘post-professional’ period. Curriculum decisions are taken out of teachers’ hands and there is little encouragement to engage critically with subject content, pedagogic approaches or wider contexts. Attacks on local authorities have seen the education system fragmented, with some schools operating ‘independently’ and able to employ ‘unqualified’ teachers. Ball (2008) similarly highlights particular periods that have generated different systemic structures in state education. The current ‘managerial or competitive state’ threatens state education with the ‘end of a national system locally administered’ (57). These changes make it much harder for teachers to maintain any sort of commitment to a co-operative ethos. The teachers in this study suggest they were ‘fortunate’ to begin when they did. They acknowledge the support and opportunities they had. But the circumstances they started in did not emerge by accident. They were the organic culmination of deliberate attempts to democratise English throughout the 1940s and ‘50s. Practitioners did it for themselves. And they can do again.

In fact, it is crucial in current circumstances that English teachers have a strong, coherent, collective voice in defining the subject and its future direction. In March 2016 it was announced that all state schools would be forced to become academies – ‘independent’ schools that get public money. Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, claimed enforced academisation was necessary ‘to drive up standards and set schools free from the shackles of local bureaucracy’ (in *The Guardian*, 16th March 2016). But this move is designed to create further divisions between schools and consolidate centralised control. The contradictions are stark. In a bid to ‘drive up standards’ Osborne aims to remove what few support mechanisms remain for teachers. The informants in this study do not view the support they had from advisers and inspectors, from local colleagues and the English Centre as ‘shackles’ that stopped them raising ‘standards’. In fact as Dixon (2013) claims, current teachers struggle to ‘learn to improve teaching and learning in their classes’ because they already ‘lack LEA advisers, a teachers’ centre, and any national project’ (28). Removing the remaining ‘shackles’ will inevitably make English teachers even more isolated.

So.

In the spirit of this article, get in touch, talk to colleagues, initiate a dialogue. What are English teachers’ priorities in current contexts? What are the circumstances in which we are forced to operate? If we can generate strong answers to these questions it might be possible to challenge monologic conceptions of the subject and re-define them on our own terms. From this position it would be possible to agitate for a stronger collective voice in defining the aims of the subject. Let’s define *our* subject on *our* terms – ‘We not I’ not ‘I me mine’.

Notes on contributor

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