**Disrupting Continuities – Re-thinking Conceptions of ‘Growth’ in English Teaching**

**Abstract**

In this piece I explore the concept of ‘growth’ in English teaching. Starting with John Dixon’s ‘growth’ model, I argue that by re-imagining his ideas in current contexts, practitioners might re-focus and re-invigorate the priorities of English teaching. Dominant conceptions of ‘growth’ are explored, along with their influence on teacher working cultures and the speech genres they draw on. I argue that by critically challenging dominant discourses and cultural perspectives, it is possible to generate new narratives and open up new possibilities for the subject.

Key words – ‘growth’, John Dixon, residual and emergent cultures, Bakhtin, speech genres

**Introduction**

When former UK Education Secretary Michael Gove used a 2013 speech to argue for a more traditional curriculum in English, he made several assumptions about what the subject should be aiming to do. He also implied that by promoting certain values, certain aesthetics and certain discourses, children in English classrooms might ‘grow’ to become ‘cultured’. Gove argued children should read *Middlemarch* rather than *Breaking Dawn*, because ‘there is a Great Tradition of English Literature – a canon of transcendent works – and Breaking Dawn is not part of it’ (Gove, 2013). Gove’s confidence in these ‘transcendent works’ foregrounds a common belief that they contain ‘universal truths’ about human existence that are easily and equally applicable to all people. So, much more was at stake than simply getting children to read George Eliot: Gove was evidently in the business of promoting particular types of knowledge and a homogenised conception of culture as natural. This ‘growth’ through English literature discourse enjoys an enduring continuity in dominant narratives around the subject (Goodwyn, 2012). This is a continuity that should be challenged.

Gove’s elitist curriculum concerns reinforce a teacher-led, knowledge-based model of practice – the literature over the learner, as it were. And in England, since Gove’s speech school English has been re-defined through the language of cultural elitism (Coultas 2013). The curriculum has been re-orientated to focus closely on the ‘canon’, on ‘correctness’ in Standard English grammar and spelling, with speaking and listening almost eliminated. Other recent policy initiatives also explicitly promote this elitist approach (changes to GCSEs, grammar tests, the proposed reintroduction of grammar schools). And these circumstances are not unique to England. In different contexts around the world English is under pressure. Unwin and Yandell (2016) argue that decades of neo-liberal policy initiatives, marketisation, ‘high stakes’ testing and international league tables have had the effect of narrowing the curriculum. Also, ‘edu-businesses’ have exploited opportunities globally to commodify education and produce curricula that are supposedly ‘deliverable with the aid of scripted lessons and the rest of the paraphernalia of an “Academy-in-a-box” and measurable through a few simple standardized tests’ (2016: 124). But where is the room for children to ‘grow’ in current models? Where is the room to engage with a diversity of cultures and backgrounds? In this piece I will argue there is an urgent need for practitioners to re-visit and re-define the concept of ‘growth’ in English teaching, to disrupt the enduring continuity of dominant discourses. As my starting point, I return to John Dixon’s evolving conception of ‘growth’, which provides a good example of practitioner-led reform and development. It also emphasises the importance of practitioners’ engaging critically with theory and key concepts in English teaching. Critical engagement with Dixon’s ideas might help practitioners recalibrate what ‘growth’ means in current contexts.

**John Dixon’s ‘growth’ model**

John Dixon published *Growth Through English* in 1967. The book examines events, discussions and resolutions from the Dartmouth Conference held in New Hampshire, USA, in 1966. The conference aimed to generate debate about what school English *was* – its aims, strategies, missions – and it is sometimes presented as an important moment in the evolution of school English. Joseph Harris (1991: 631) suggests, that for some optimistic teachers, ‘Dartmouth has symbolized a kind of Copernican shift from a view of English as something one learns about to a sense of it as something one does’. However, Harris also claims that in reality much practice in English has continued as it had before. In his account of events, Dixon explains how attendees at the conference discussed various models of English. There were differences of opinion about curriculum content and the skills English should aim to develop. However, he suggests there was broad agreement on the notion of ‘growth’. His aim in the book was to ‘draw from the discussions and reports at Dartmouth such ideas as are directly relevant to my own work in class and to that of teachers I know’. This, he claims, was not intended simply to provide a summary of events, but ‘rather to propose a new starting point’ (1967: xi) for debate on the future direction of the subject. Dixon re-imagined existing conceptions of ‘growth’, proposing radically alternative approaches.

Studying literature in order to ‘enculturate’ students was not part of the agenda. ‘Growth’ was re-conceptualised in more democratic and participatory ways, and Dixon foregrounds the role of language in learning – emphasising personal voice, innovation and exploration. ‘Growth’ is firmly located in children’s own social and cultural realities. Practice should focus on ‘the need to re-examine the learning processes and the meaning to the individual of what he [*sic*] is doing in English lessons’ (1967: 1-2). The idea was that children should ‘grow’ to have greater agency through dynamic classroom experiences. The suggested model for achieving this focused on specific developments. There should be a stronger focus on student talk, critical discussion and drama in learning. Writing activities should be ‘exploratory’ and allow students to engage with ideas and negotiate the interplay of meaning in context. The processes of thinking and writing are of greater importance than the end product. Children’s real lives should be central to their learning and they should be freed from the ‘limits of the teacher’s vision’ of learning outcomes (1967: 48). Similarly, students should be ‘freed from the *disabling conceptions* of “correctness” and “dialect”’ (1967: 77).

This approach views all language use as fundamentally located in social processes and practices. From this perspective, traditional canonical literature is not afforded a privileged position, and popular cultural texts are equally as worthy of serious study. Also, because English is in constant flux, it is incumbent on teachers to be adaptable and critically alert in their practice. But Dixon’s ideas evolved and ‘growth’ might also be conceptualised as having more radical connotations. When reflecting back on the 1960s Dixon (1991) later claimed,

. . . there had to be a revolutionary break from defining language as reified object, towards observing social processes dependent on signs in use. (1991: 186)

This implies that language should be studied critically in its social, historical and cultural contexts. Obviously, Dixon is writing this after the ‘cultural turn’ in English studies and he adopts a more confident theoretical position. But his evolving ideas can also be seen embryonically in the revised and updated 1975 edition of *Growth Through English – set in the perspective of the seventies*. He explains how changes in his practice were ‘not confined to English teaching at all – that’s just one microcosm of a far wider struggle’ (1975: 111). This ‘struggle’ was about ‘teacher and learner, parent and child, manager and worker. About the dilemmas of coercive authority and inescapable subordination’ (1975:111). Dixon claims he had an ‘uneasy awakening’ in the aftermath of Dartmouth, when he began to recognise how he and other teachers were ‘prone’ to use ‘language to dominate and constrict’ their students in classroom interactions. These circumstances provoked him to re-consider the potential kinds of classroom relationships he created.

In developing his ideas about relationships and the role of language in learning, Dixon does not argue simply for ‘progressive’ or ‘child centred’ approaches to practice. This might make English lessons more interesting for students, but it essentially supports and maintains the status quo. Rather, he proposes a radical reconceptualisation of what school English is. Dominant conceptions of English impose particular limits and expectations on the subject – in terms of content, practice, expected outcomes. But this bears a false relation to the realities of lived experience. Instead, Dixon argues the fundamental concern of English is experience itself. As he claimed in the 1967 edition: ‘a new model will be needed . . . to redirect our attention to life as it really is’ (1967: 114). How is experience, and life, mediated through various contexts and factors – cultural, social, political, discoursal and so on? Dixon implies that by collaborating to engage critically with a range of dialectical processes, teachers and students might ‘grow’ to understand their influence on consciousness. He argues in the 1975 edition:

The questioning of power and subordination in contemporary capitalism – or in so-called communism – is a running battle that I expect to reach beyond my own lifetime. What’s hard to bear is the confusion inside ourselves. We are beginning to see how adults can learn from children, and maybe what kinds of social relationships would release fuller potentialities in the converse process.

But the social models built into us, and within which we work, consistently pressurize and distort the effort to create such relationships. (1975: 112)

The restrictive power of dominant discourses and structures has a significant influence on consciousness. But by initiating genuine dialogic relationships, with teachers as ‘listeners’, there is the potential to work collaboratively in order to understand the ‘confusion inside ourselves’ by ‘sharing the role of the learner’. Dixon discovered that when students ‘were given the chance to talk among themselves’ they made ‘unexpected progress’ (1975: 111). By allowing students to voice their concerns, initiatives and experiences, Dixon claims to have discovered ‘quite unsuspected processes of feeling and thought, which class discussion dominated by the teacher’s language had obliterated’ (1975: 111). In learning together, teachers and students can generate alternative discourses and narratives that can open up new possibilities and expose contradictions in dominant perspectives. Dixon suggests the skills and critical abilities generated through these kinds of relationships and learning processes extend well beyond the English classroom, and across different temporal circumstances –

Still, if we can understand people, ourselves included, in the process of formulating new perceptions and ideas at different stages in their lives, then we have a new basis for changing our roles as teachers. I believe that, over the past year or two, ideas have come to together in such a way as to transform my perceptions, first in learning and teaching, and second, in talking, writing, and reading well beyond the boundaries of the subject. (1975: 112)

Dixon argues that English cannot be limited to particular types of literature or static conceptions of language. It must be located into the various contexts, discourses, cultures and power relations that learners (including teachers) exist within. It should also be orientated towards confronting, understanding and re-imagining these circumstances. Dixon’s developing conception of ‘growth’ aims to make English more democratic by proposing an alternative theoretical base from which new ways of working might emerge.

The language of ‘growth’ remains prominent in English teacher narratives. Yet despite ‘growth’s’ continued presence, the potency and radical potential of Dixon’s model is largely absent. There is an urgent need to take stock, and for practitioners to disrupt the continuity and re-define what ‘growth’ means for them and their students. In what follows, I explore some theoretical perspectives that might help this process.

**‘Growth’ in English teacher narratives and working cultures**

Kate Findlay (2010) researched English teacher identities and found that the dominant discourses they draw on ‘remain firmly rooted in the study of literature’ and that ‘the cultural heritage model is still dominant’ (2010: 13). Findlay adopted Raymond Williams’ framework for analysing cultural production to make sense of her informants’ narratives. Williams (1977; 1981) suggests the ongoing processes of cultural production occur in three distinct, yet inseparably related ways: ‘dominant’, ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’. The ‘dominant’ perspective is characterised by clear, deeply integrated social forms and institutions. Dominant perspectives are often seen as ‘natural and necessary’ to those dominated by them, while those who promote particular dominant perspectives ‘may be quite unevenly aware’ of how and why they are produced. This ‘unevenness’ can range from dominant groups having ‘conscious control’ of cultural production, or a ‘presumed’ acceptance of the ‘autonomy of professional and aesthetic values’ (1981: 204). However, Williams insists,

But then it is also the case that in cultural production both the *residual* – work made in earlier and often different societies and times, yet still significant – and the *emergent* – work of various new kinds – are often equally available as *practices.* Certainly the dominant can absorb or attempt to absorb both. But there is always older work kept alive by certain groups as an extension of or alternative to dominant contemporary cultural production. And there is almost always new work which tries to move (and at times succeeds in moving) beyond the dominant forms and their socio-formal relations. (1981: 204)

These different perspectives locate cultural practices into space and time and emphasise the inescapable inter-connectedness of history (the ‘residual’), current circumstances (the ‘dominant’) and potential future developments (the ‘emergent’). The categories represent powerful dialectical processes that produce different kinds of conflict and tension. ‘Dominant’ forms are consistently challenged by ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ perspectives which compete for legitimacy and identity. These dialectical processes help define the character of ‘emergent’ and ‘residual’ forms while at the same time illuminating contradictions and flaws in the ‘dominant’ perspective. If applied to the context of English teaching Williams’ categories help shed light on the intense struggle practitioners must engage in to maintain identities and working cultures – but these can never be fixed or immutable because of the constant pushing and pulling of the different perspectives. In short, English teacher identities, cultures, beliefs and agency are continuously negotiated through a complex and unstable set of ideological and historical tensions. Findlay (2010) argues that considering how these processes work can be useful for understanding English teachers and their work. And if English teachers themselves understand how these processes work then they might be in a stronger position from which to challenge ‘dominant’ perspectives that potentially work against their own best interests – to push back in ‘oppositional’ ways.

Findlay, in the UK context, found that the ‘dominant’ cultural perspective ‘could be applied to the personal growth through literature discourse which research suggests has had a powerful and tenacious grip on the profession’ (2010:12). This ‘dominant’ model ‘has absorbed the once emergent discourse of personal growth’, with writers studied for their ability to raise issues and promote discussion (2010:13). But ‘personal growth’ needs to be defined. In Dixon’s terms ‘growth’ in practice must relate to ‘culture as the pupil knows it’ (1967: 3).

Findlay is right that in England cultural-heritage perspectives continue to dominate English policy discourse, with some elements of ‘personal growth’ absorbed. However, current conceptions of ‘growth’ eschew any serious consideration of the kinds of relationships Dixon refers to in learning contexts. Findlay suggests her informants ‘have coupled the heritage model with reader response theory’ (2010: 13). This coupling, she argues, allows teachers to value individual students’ views about reading experiences without necessarily seeking ‘right or wrong’ answers. Dixon’s ‘growth’ model is more radical and presupposes a dialectic: that social existence shapes consciousness, which in turn acts back on the material conditions of that social existence. This conception of ‘growth’ is missing from the ‘dominant’ culture of English teaching in present circumstances.

Of course, for Williams (1958) culture is ‘ordinary’, a ‘whole way of life’, and Dixon alludes to this by insisting on the need ‘to redirect our attention to life as it really is’ (1967: 114). The point is not to fill ‘cultural gaps’ in children’s lives through literature, but to start with an exploration of their own social realities and consider how language might be oppressive or liberating. By adopting this approach, practitioners can help students to consider how the narratives, discourses and cultures they exist within have a significant influence on how they view themselves and their life trajectories. ‘Growth’ occurs not by being hand-held into some abstract space of ‘transcendent’ thinking, but by engaging critically with immediate material conditions. ‘Growth’ occurs when the discourses and narratives we live by are challenged and re-constructed in alternative ways that offer different possibilities and outcomes. A complicated range of factors influences identity construction, and understanding how these processes occur is crucial for critical engagement with present circumstances. But how do current ‘dominant’ perspectives in English teaching influence practitioner conceptions of ‘growth’? Tracing the genealogy of ‘dominant’ perspectives is important for understanding how they emerge and differ from previous incarnations. Williams (1993) criticises ‘dominant’ perspectives which assume that by promoting particular ideals and values it is somehow possible to generate a common culture:

If you get into the habit of thinking that a bourgeois society produces, in a simple and direct way, a bourgeois culture, then you are likely to think that a socialist society will produce, also simply and directly, a socialist culture.’ (1993: 282)

This kind of thinking is aimed at producing pre-determined cultural norms, or ‘acceptable’ types of social behaviour. Indeed, some aspects of life (and English teaching) will have been ‘commonly defined in advance, as an authoritative prescription’ (1993: 283). Yet this can never create universality in social and cultural practices. ‘Residual’ and ‘emergent’ cultures inevitably generate a diversity of competing and clashing perspectives. But this does not mean those in dominant positions do not try – Michael Gove for example. But it is not possible to generate a ‘dominant’ culture in this ‘simple and direct way’. So what was Gove up to?

Ken Jones argues that Gove actively promotes himself as ‘counter-revolutionary’, intent on ‘defeating ideas and practices which carry the traces of a different educational project’ (2013: 157). Indeed, Jones suggests Gove sees the fight against progressivism as unfinished business and he is resolved on finishing the job started under the Thatcher administration of the 1980s. One way he attempts to do this is by presenting conservative cultural perspectives as natural, in ways to discredit possible alternatives. Goodson and Rudd (2012: 5) argue that, in present circumstances, the ‘prevailing hegemonic orthodoxy’ constrains any debate around education through a ‘truncated discourse’. Dominant orthodoxies are presented as the sole bases for solutions to educational, social and economic problems. The effects of this process render possible alternatives as ‘ineffectual or fanciful against the harsh “realities” facing the existing dominant order’ (2012: 5). Goodson and Rudd propose a concept of ‘refraction’ to help investigate and uncover the relationship between ‘actor and structure’, by placing ‘context and history as central to explorations’ (2012: 8). Exploring structural circumstances, cultures, discourses, policy initiatives and social action can foreground the struggle practitioners must engage in when confronted by the various ‘power relations within them’. Are there contradictions between English teachers’ personal and professional narratives, and the material circumstances they operate within?

Williams’ categories can provide a theoretical base for English teachers to engage in this kind of analysis, and thus have greater agency in defining their work and conceptions of ‘growth’. Understanding the dialectical relationship between different cultural perspectives can help to expose the often contradictory and oppositional interactions among them. But this alone is insufficient. There is also a need to examine teachers’ personal and professional narratives, to consider how they ‘act back’ on the material conditions they exist within. Critically engaging with these dialectical processes can help practitioners generate alternative narratives to challenge prevailing definitions of English and ‘growth’.

**Discourses and speech genres**

Do dominant discourses around English promote a particular kind of teacher identity that is out of tune with the current realities of the job? This is obviously not a simple case of cause and effect, and there are inevitably various levels of ‘refraction’ (different critical responses – Goodson & Rudd 2012 & 2016) in how practitioners respond to dominant models. However, the ‘cultural heritage/growth through literature’ discourse has proved resilient in English teacher narratives, having survived through various incarnations of the subject. Indeed, Findlay argues this perspective is ‘as apposite for new entrants to the profession as for those nearing the end of their careers’ (2010: 14). But there appear to be critical differences between what teachers *say* they have been doing, and the realities and expectations created by policy initiatives.

So how do dominant discourses influence English teacher identities, attitudes and, ultimately, practice? Are there alternative narratives that might encourage practitioners to assess critically their professional identities and actions? At this point I want to explore Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of *speech genres*. Ways of talking about English are underpinned by socially constructed narrative templates. There is the ‘growth through literature’ discourse reproduced by Findlay’s informants. But there are also ‘oppositional’ ways of taking about the subject. Bakhtin argues that, because ‘all the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language’, the ‘nature and forms’ of that language must inevitably be as diverse (1986: 60). So any subject can be spoken about in a multitude of ways. But for Bakhtin each ‘sphere of human activity’ develops its own ‘relatively stable types’ of utterance, or ‘speech genres’, which tend to dominate the ways of talking about a subject. Different types of genres exist: primary (or simple) ones equate to everyday dialogue, they are located in immediate social contexts and are related to the ‘direct utterances of others’. Secondary (or complex) genres are intensely ideological and tend to be ‘highly developed and organised cultural communication . . . that is artistic, scientific, socio-political and so on’ (1986: 62).

It is these secondary genres that might be particularly influential in the construction of attitudes, identities and ideological perspectives. When secondary genres emerge ‘they absorb and digest various primary genres’ (1986: 62) which can give the impression that the dominant ideological form is closely connected to social reality. Bakhtin insists this is far from the case, and that, once absorbed, primary genres ‘assume a special kind of character’, which orientates them towards the dominant perspective. This ‘special character’ might mean some groups talk supportively about subjects that are ironically against their own best interests. By examining the inter-connections between primary and secondary genres it is possible to interrogate the ‘interrelations among language, ideology, and world view’ (1986: 62). ‘Growth through literature’ has been absorbed into dominant secondary genres in English teaching. Within these genres is a diversity of sometimes conflicting primary genres around ‘growth’, which over time have clashed and amalgamated into ‘acceptable’ contemporary models. ‘Growth’s’ current ‘special character’ does not incorporate Dixon’s potentially radical dialectic, making it less forceful. This means practitioners can use the language of ‘growth’ without necessarily seeing an ideological conflict in promoting this approach and working within existing policy constraints.

Contemporary conceptions of ‘growth’ are not considered threatening to the dominant orthodoxy in English teaching, and thus they remain a prominent, yet effete part of the broader discourse. But Dixon’s ‘growth’ model generated new speech genres around the subject (the learner over the literature?). Over time however, the digestion of ‘growth’ into dominant secondary genres has neutralised some, but by no means all, of its radical potential. It has been absorbed into broader secondary genres that promote functionality and uniformity in practice. However, the speech genres that Dixon’s work generated still exist residually, and can be drawn on by practitioners. But how do various speech genres influence English teacher conceptions of ‘growth’?

Individuals acquire genres as they learn their native language and we learn to use them long before we master abstract aspects of grammar. Genres enter both our experiences and consciousness simultaneously through social, dialectical processes. All utterances and speech genres are coloured by our evaluative perspective of the subject at hand; this determines syntactic, lexical and structural decisions. Meaning, intention and expression are not inherent in the linguistic properties themselves, but are negotiated through the complex processes of ‘addressivity’ (utterances directed at somebody with intention and expected outcomes) and ‘active response’ (on the part of the listener/reader, linked to whole sequences of utterances, also with intention and expectation) (1986: 69). Some genres provoke immediate responses in social action, orders/commands for example. Others though, evoke ‘a silent responsive understanding . . . with a delayed reaction’ (1986: 69). Bakhtin argues that sooner or later what is heard and understood will ‘find its response in the subsequent speech or behaviour of the listener’ (1986: 69). And in most cases,

. . . genres of complex cultural communication are intended precisely for this kind of actively responsive understanding with delayed action. (1986: 69)

Dominant secondary genres influence English teacher identities and practices. An utterance’s ultimate purpose is ‘determining the active responsive position of the other participants in the communication’ (1986: 82).Gove’s insistence on the ‘canon of transcendent works’ in English is patently aimed at this ‘responsive understanding with delayed action’. In that case it is crucial to consider how ‘any utterance is a link in a very complexly organised chain of other utterances’ (1986: 69). To understand teacher definitions of ‘growth’ in current contexts requires the analysis of utterances within this contextual chain. Bakhtin argues,

When one analyses an individual sentence apart from its context, the traces of addressivity and the influence of the anticipated response, dialogical echoes from others’ preceding utterances, faint traces of changes of speech subjects that have furrowed the utterance from within – all of these are lost, erased, because they are all foreign to the sentence as a unit of language. All these phenomena are connected with the whole of the utterance, and when this whole escapes the field of vision of the analyst they cease to exist for him. (1986: 99-100)

When English teachers talk about ‘growth’ as an aspect of their practice, what does it mean in different contextual circumstances? What is the influence of audience, setting, previous utterances, dominant secondary genres and ‘echoes’ of others’ voices? Bakhtin insists the ‘history of speech genres . . . reflects changes taking place in social life’ (1986: 65). So, ways of talking about English must inevitably change along with other social, cultural and political developments. Yet despite wider social and cultural change there remains the enduring continuity of ‘growth’ through literature in culturally elitist terms. If it is possible to identify and define the ‘dialogical echoes’ in practitioner definitions of ‘growth’ (where do our ideas come from?), then it is feasible that contradictions will emerge between what teachers say their intentions are and the realities of practice.

Dixon insists the central business of English is the critical examination of ‘life as it really is’. This means exploring how experience is mediated by a range of contexts and factors – cultural, social, historical, political, physical and so on. Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of heteroglossia is useful here. All experience is mediated through complicated, multi-voiced and limitless dialogic processes. Meaning is continuously negotiated through processes in which utterances converge, conflict and transform one another. Bakhtin argues that these processes are almost impossible to recover, but they are fundamental aspects of social experience, of life. Any sort of structural linguistics (or grammar tests, ‘literacy’ strategies?) can never recover or make sense of these processes. For this reason, experience, and life, cannot be conceptualised from an individualist perspective. To do this means it will be ‘cut off from the fundamentally social modes in which discourse lives’ (Bakhtin 1981: 259). Instead, experience, and life, has to be examined as relational process.

Practitioners’ ways of talking about English and ‘growth’ are influenced by the dominant effects of heteroglossia and speech genres. Yet there are conflicting speech genres in English teaching. Findlay’s (2010) research suggests that the connection of ‘growth’ with ‘cultural heritage’ might cause some confusion in teacher identities and missions. The terms ‘heritage’ and ‘growth’ appear contradictory. But Bakhtin’s conceptions of speech genre and heteroglossia offer a theoretical template for practitioners to engage critically, like Dixon did, with the concept of ‘growth’. Can English be re-imagined in ways that disrupt dominant discourses and emphasise the ‘fundamentally social modes’ in which experience, and life, is negotiated? By foregrounding the various dialectical processes through which experience is mediated, practitioners can indeed revive and re-imagine what ‘growth’ means in current circumstances. Practitioner-led dialogue is crucial for re-imagining conceptions of ‘growth’ in English teaching. The speech genres generated through this process can emerge as powerful secondary genres to challenge dominant discourses and working cultures in the subject.

**Disrupting continuities?**

Far from unifying English teaching, dominant discourses often create pressure, division or resentment. Yet the act of challenging these discourses is extremely difficult because we *live* them. However, by critically confronting our ways of talking, the discourses and speech genres we draw on, the cultural perspectives we promote, it is possible to locate their origins in numerous contexts, as social constructions.

Kenneth Gergen argues that confronting discourses can result in ‘a greater knitting of human community’ (1999: 63). This is because ‘we are challenged to step out of the realities we have created’ (1999: 62). Doing this means various assumptions can be re-imagined – for instance Gergen poses a number of questions about what discourses imply, who benefits, who loses out, whose voices are heard, what values and traditions are maintained, which are marginalised, what kind of future is being created? Language constitutes social reality. But re-defining and re-describing definitions, discourses and cultures can generate new and different possibilities. Gergen argues,

If language is a central means by which we carry on our lives together – carrying the past into the present to create the future – then our ways of talking and writing become targets of concern. It is not only our grand languages of self, truth and morality at stake; our futures are also fashioned from mundane exchanges in families, friendships, and organizations, in the informal comments, funny stories and the remainder of the daily hubbub. (1999: 62)

Children’s lives are of course part of ‘the daily hubbub’. This is where they grow. Any conception of ‘growth’ in English must take account of the various exchanges, relationships and contexts Gergen refers to. In Dixon’s words, attention must be paid ‘to life as it really is’, and students must be given opportunities to explore their own ‘mundane exchanges’. Dixon’s ‘growth’ model provides templates, speech genres and cultural perspectives that can challenge dominant orthodoxies in English teaching. In combining Bakhtinian theory with Williams’ categories, practitioners would have a strong theoretical base through which to engage critically with the types of social relationships, conceptions of language and power relations that Dixon refers to. This engagement might foreground, as Dixon did, a ‘new starting point’ for debates around the subject. Is it possible to challenge the ‘grand language’ of the ‘growth’ through literature discourse in English teaching? How might Dixon’s model be re-imagined in current contexts? These questions can only be resolved through dialogue and the active confrontation of discourses, speech genres and working cultures. Can English teachers work collaboratively to confront these issues? A reconceptualisation of ‘growth’ can lead to an improved future in which practitioners and students collaborate to recognise and challenge competing discourses and realities – to generate new narratives and possibilities. This would be a model of practice that provides students with the critical skills to imagine and forge a better future. In present circumstances, it seems the need for this is urgent.

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