

Professional Memory in Context: Can it Help Counter the ‘Counter-revolution’?

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This article explores the concept of ‘Professional Memory’ in English teaching. It is argued that English teacher memories, analysed through a collective lens and in particular conjunctures, can provide powerful evidence of practitioner-led reform and development. Such evidence can be used to challenge the existing theoretical framework of English teaching, and the dominant discourses surrounding the subject.

Keywords: Professional memory, collective memory, history of English teaching, life histories, conjunctures

Periods of crisis and anxiety can provoke various kinds of conservative reaction. Indeed, political, cultural and structural re-organisation aimed at securing and maintaining long-cherished hegemonies is evident everywhere. In education, conservative re-organisation in these critical moments is well documented (see for example Jones 1989 & 2003; Goodson, 2005; Lowe, 2007; Ball, 2008), and frequently vitriolic, with most venom aimed at supporters of comprehensive and progressive education—just think back to the controversy surrounding the Black Papers of the late 1960s (see Cox and Dyson 1971). The Black Papers were a series of right-wing essays that criticised, among other things, educational reform, comprehensivisation and progressivism. In these periods it is inevitable that English becomes intensely politicised because it deals with fundamental aspects of national culture and identity: language probably being the most salient. And, as Gramsci taught us—‘Every time the issue of language surfaces . . . it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore’. The ‘governing class’ re-positions itself to preserve dominant relationships with ‘the national-popular mass’: actions intended ‘to re-organise the cultural hegemony’ (1985, 183–4).

Conservative criticism of English has been common currency for decades (see Allen, 1980; Marenbon 1994; Cameron 1995; Davies 1996; Coultas 2013). Policy initiatives in recent decades (for example, the National Curriculum, the focus on ‘functional’ literacy skills, the re-introduction of formal grammar testing and the downgrading of classroom talk) have re-orientated English away from the democratic conceptualisation of the 1975 Bullock Report to the culturally elitist curriculum of 2013. To justify these developments, much conservative criticism has focussed on the supposed excesses of the mythological ‘golden age’ in the 1960s and 1970s: a period often stigmatised as having low standards, weak practitioners and high levels of ‘failure’. Opposition to the ideals of comprehensivism and

progressivism has produced consistent lines of argument since the Black Papers (Coultas 2013; Jones 2014a). However compelling they appear though, these arguments are weakened because they often fail to engage with the inter-contextualities that underpin the claims made. This makes them vulnerable.

There is abundant written evidence of progressive development in education since the Second World War (see for example Simon 1955; Williams 1961; Benn and Simon 1972; Jones 1983 & 2003; Lowe 2007). English in particular saw dramatic change in these periods (see Dixon 1967 & 1991; Shayer 1972; Medway 1980 & 1990; Ball, Kenny and Gardiner 1990; Gibbons 2013; Medway, Hardcastle Brewis & Crook 2014). In different ways these authors indicate how issues around curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, learning and children's agency were re-imagined by pioneering practitioners in different conjunctures and contexts. Ken Jones (2014b) argues that curriculum and assessment are 'fundamental parts of the grammar of education'. And,

Changing that grammar, through the abolition of the 11-plus and through grass-roots curriculum reform, was one of the greatest achievements in the long educational revolution of the 20th century.

It is this experience we need to return to now, in confronting the latest stage of what is plainly a counter-revolution. (20)

One way of capturing this experience, and confronting this 'counter-revolution', is by exploring teacher memory. Where no systematic record of teacher experience exists, memory serves to hold representations of practice for future generations. Crucially, it provides a resource for evaluating the demands of current dispensations. I have carried out research into the 'Professional Memory' (PM) of English teaching in the period 1965–1975. This involved interviewing English teachers who began their careers at this time. Their stories offer accounts of events, circumstances, practices, beliefs and attitudes that might challenge current dominant discourses in English. These teachers were highly organised, committed and responsive to changing contexts and theoretical developments. When critically analysed from a collective perspective and located into various contexts, the stories provide compelling evidence of practice, innovation and change in the period that can enhance historical understandings of practitioner-led reform. Such accounts are personally representative of people involved in the day-to-day business of teaching; as such they offer practical alternatives that current and future English teachers might access in order to confront the objective realities and theoretical matrices within which they work. It is my argument that by constructing a body of collective practitioner PM, and locating it into a range of contexts, it is

possible to offer alternative narratives to challenge current perspectives. In this piece I will address the issue of PM conceptually and consider its usefulness for English teachers.

Contexts and Discourses

The school subject English does not exist in a vacuum, and to better understand its current status it is necessary to consider wider educational realities and discourses. To give an important example, one of Michael Wilshaw's first acts as Ofsted chief inspector was to announce he was 'doing away with the word "satisfactory"' in the school inspection process (speech delivered on 9th February 2012). This move was initiated because 'our national ambition should be for all schools to be good or better', Wilshaw claimed. From now it would be irrelevant if schools satisfactorily met the demands and expectations of national standards and requirements. Instead Wilshaw argued pressure should be applied to 'focus minds' and send an 'unequivocal message to schools that decisive action is necessary to bring about improvement' (3). Thus, eradicating 'satisfactory' gave the ratchet of external accountability one more turn. Crucially though, it also re-defined the theoretical base from which teachers would work and be judged—meeting expected standards would now be 'unsatisfactory'.

To justify these changes Wilshaw offered a personal recollection of pre-Ofsted realities:

Our education system is much better because of greater accountability in the system. Those who think we haven't made progress need to remember what it was like before Ofsted. I certainly do. In the seventies and eighties, when I worked in places like Peckham, Bermondsey, Hackney and West Ham, whole generations of children and young people were failed.

The school where I was head before moving to Ofsted, Mossbourne Academy in Hackney, stands on the site of Hackney Downs School, which in its day represented the worst excesses of that period. But there would have been many others just as bad that never hit the headlines and got away with blue murder. (2012, 2)

Such comments indicate the power of recollection in colouring how the past is remembered and how it influences future action. Thus Wilshaw draws on, and contributes to, a particular collective memory (see Middleton and Edwards 1990; Halbwachs 1992) of these periods that is hostile to progressivism. How does this collective memory work? How does it achieve its effects? I would say this particular collective memory has a long history and that it reproduces 'fairly stable types of utterance' to characterise this period—what the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) calls 'speech genres'. Such utterances and narratives

have proved politically expedient for initiating various kinds of systemic and ideological change. Former Education Secretary Michael Gove holds similarly negative views on progressivism. In a 2008 speech Gove ventured the thought that ‘pupil centred learning’ had ‘dethroned’ the teacher, suggesting this ‘misplaced ideology has let down generations of children. It is an approach to education that has been called progressive but in fact it is anything but’ (cited in Howlett 2013, 1). Gove presents these ideas as though they were commonly agreed facts requiring no further discussion. Both men present the past as objective reality, yet they offer it without any reference to specificities, wider historical contexts or social and cultural circumstances. They choose not to recognise empirical evidence or written histories that gainsay these claims. Their arguments are weakened because they fail to contextualise them. In that case, how might the scrutiny of English teacher PM, located in various contexts, help to counter some of these claims?

It is true that narrative is produced with particular intentions and expected responses, what Bakhtin (1986) refers to as ‘addressivity’, and Wilshaw and Gove clearly play to their audience. However their concerns can be criticised as fable or opinion without being located into what Ivor Goodson (1992 & 2013) calls a ‘genealogy of context’. Goodson insists that when stories, narratives and memories are reproduced they are underpinned by chains of context that help construct experience differently in different conjunctures. Therefore claims about past events can be dismissed as anecdote or ignorance if they are not located into a range of contexts—historical, social, cultural, political or personal. So how do Gove and Wilshaw get away with reproducing damaging myths about the past?

The problem is partly to do with educational history, which Gary McCulloch (2000) divides into three distinct versions of the past—‘official’, ‘private’ and ‘public’. He demonstrates how the ‘official’ past, the version promoted by the state, is subject to change during different economic, cultural and ideological periods. From the 1920s to the 1960s McCulloch argues the ‘official’ past was recognisable for promoting a ‘liberal notion of steady, gradual evolution towards social improvement’ (2000, 9). Official policy documents during this period used educational history to justify developments and improvements to the system: a story of progress. However, by the early 1970s the ‘official’ past no longer corresponded with the perceived social realities of teachers, politicians or public, and this version of the past, as it had existed until then, was obliterated. Its absence from official discourses paved the way for various kinds of aggressive ideological assault. However, it resurfaces in the 1980s in a very different guise:

This was the antithesis of the liberal-progressive version of the past that had been so potent a generation before. History became a story of failure and disappointment, even of betrayal. It was seen increasingly as part of the problem, as an explanation of failure, rather than as the basis for solutions. A hostile, negative view of history as the enemy of an improved future is a striking feature of education policies in the 1980s, representing in many ways an estrangement from the educational past. (2000, 11)

This re-imagined educational past has made it easier for those on the right to generate prevailing discourses that intensify this ‘estrangement’—see Gove and Wilshaw above. A lack of contextualisation allows those in dominant positions to select and present politically expedient arguments. Goodson (1992) argues that, in some circumstances, officials ‘might appropriate and misuse data about teachers’ lives’ (239). And supplying genealogies of context ‘can provide teachers as a group with aspects of “the complete picture” which those who control their lives have (or at least aspire to have)’ (240). Therefore, by amassing a collective PM of English teaching and locating it into various genealogies, it will be possible to generate narratives to challenge the on-going ‘counter-revolution’.

‘Counter revolution’ and conjunctures

Jones (2013) insists Gove deliberately positions himself as ‘counter-revolutionary’, hell-bent on ‘defeating ideas and practices which carry the traces of a different educational project’—one that promotes inclusiveness, creativity and child-centredness (157). But his ‘enemy’ is anachronistic. Neoliberalism, marketisation and competition have been largely accepted by the mainstream political establishment, so Conservatives have had to *invent* an enemy, or at least resurrect one. Conservatives ‘justify their own policies’ by attacking an enemy that, despite having an ‘ideological afterlife’, is much weaker than it used to be as a ‘political force capable of shaping institutions and practices’ (Jones 2013, 157).

Meanwhile Conservatives have proved adept in sustaining ideological attacks on progressivism; but their arguments belong to earlier times. Jones (2014a) argues they remain opposed to dialogue with the educational establishment, promote traditional conceptions of teaching and learning and remain market focussed in policy development: ‘Gove’s speeches and articles repeat the cadences, vocabulary and preoccupations of earlier generations’ (98). Gove refers back in an attempt to ‘continue and . . . complete the “revolution” of the 1980s’. His reference points: ‘a free market, a strong state, an assertive reconstruction of “national culture”—are those of the Thatcher period’ (Jones 2014a, 103). Current circumstances are different to the Thatcher period, and creating new genealogies of context can provide solid ground from which to attack these anachronistic discourses.

Stuart Hall (1987) insists on the need to recognise and exploit moments of ‘crisis’ from which new structures emerge – ‘every crisis is also a moment of reconstruction . . . every form of power not only excludes but produces something’ (19). A critical understanding of ‘conjunctures’ can sharpen the examination of various structures, conditions and political intercessions by specifying their effects. The application of conjunctures as a critical and analytical tool makes it possible to highlight and explore different types of contradictions, which results in offering up exploitable opportunities for political action. In examining the neoliberal conjuncture that replaced the brief moment of progressivism of the ‘golden age’, Hall foregrounds Gramsci’s insistence on looking for ‘what is *specific* and *different* about this moment’ (16). By identifying difference and specificity about a historical conjuncture, it is possible to determine ‘how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain, on which a different politics must form up’ (16). The targeted application of this concept of conjunctures makes it possible not only to recognise disruption and contradiction, but to take action to turn them to one’s own advantage. It appears some English teachers in the conjuncture 1965–1975 did just this. Their collective PM can provide a template with which current English teachers might consider and challenge circumstances in existing conjunctures.

School English in the present conjuncture is defined through the language of cultural elitism. The curriculum has been manipulated to focus on spelling, grammar and Standard English, to downgrade oral work and to give prominence to the ‘English literary heritage’ (Coultais 2013). In emphasising functional skills in reading and writing and ‘testing’ these in different ways (grammar tests, phonics tests, ‘linear’ exams), particular types of knowledge are presented as fixed and authoritative. Coultas argues this is divisive,

These elitist themes in the New English curriculum are linked to a wider philosophy that views working-class culture, linguistic practices and knowledge as a deficit. This philosophy is also sceptical about educational theory and dismissive of ideas that link educational practices to child development. By caricaturing progressive educational ideas in headline grabbing and simplistic ways Gove seeks to re-establish meritocratic values that preserve elitism. (2013, 53)

So the new curriculum will inevitably make it more difficult some children to succeed. John Yandell (2013) suggests this is precisely the intention. He argues recent developments are designed to ‘ration’ educational opportunity. Yandell indicates broad evidence for this—‘the scrapping of EMA (education maintenance allowance)...the rise in university tuition fees...the closure of Sure Start centres’ (12). Punishing changes to assessment arrangements,

the return of 'norm-referencing' and an even narrower curriculum will ensure 'that there are failures' (13).

So Gove's policies, which have found seamless continuity with his successor Nicky Morgan, attempt to institutionalise 'failure'. The contradiction between discourse (arguing progressivism 'fails' children) and action (imposing policy that seeks to do just this) is palpable here and offers opportunities to take action. What is needed is a collectivist response, predicated on the weight of evidence, which can be targeted at this, and other contradictions in current contexts. This is where PM might be useful.

A Conception of PM

The term 'professional memory' has been used to refer to memories of professional practice. Cunningham (2007) uses it in relation to practitioner perspectives on the Plowden Report. Ben-Peretz (1995) investigates how memory influences 'personal professional knowledge' and constitutes a 'central part of the wisdom of practitioners' (7). Ben-Peretz foregrounds the intrinsic role memory plays in developing professional practice. Professional knowledge, she claims, is important for individual action, and it means experience can be shared with others. Studying professional memory makes it possible to understand how practitioners develop professional competence and expertise. These definitions of professional memory indicate the crucial role it plays in gaining experience. Ben-Peretz (2002) argues that with the accumulation of experience practitioners can develop 'sensitivity' and 'awareness' that something is missing: 'a sense of dissonance between expectations and reality, seem to be prerequisites for conscious and explicit learning from experience in order to improve one's practice (318). It is my argument that studies into professional memory can help English teachers to recognise any 'dissonance' between their intentions and beliefs, and realities of the job in current contexts.

My concept of 'Professional Memory' (PM) broadens understandings by locating it firmly into collective contexts. I acknowledge Ben-Peretz's suggestions, but PM extends beyond 'personal knowledge' and 'wisdom'. My approach includes generating collective practitioner memories of personal development, curriculum development, wider professional development, an analysis of conjunctures and contexts, and a consideration of how memory, as a social-relational phenomenon (Gergen 1999), is constructed. Memories of professional practice cannot be isolated from other experience, identity, culture, language and so on. This requires a study of great depth. To explore these issues I adopted a life history approach (Goodson and Sikes 2001) and six secondary English teachers were interviewed multiple

times. I investigated how my informants were socialised into the subject 'English' through various experiences before they became teachers. I then explored early professional practice in a particular conjuncture: 1965–1975. Finally I focused on the informants' current outlook on English teaching. Exploring PM in these ways meant it was necessary to recover informant memories constructed in different conjunctures in the hope of generating holistic accounts of collective experience. To make sense of teacher memories it is crucial to examine different historical periods and create Goodson's 'genealogy of context'. Memory cannot be understood without being located into the various contexts and conjunctures that contribute to its construction. In this way PM can offer alternative understandings of historical events. Far from demonstrating 'worst excess' or 'getting away with it' as Wilshaw claims, the informants I interviewed present a collective picture of professionalism that makes current conceptions seem inadequate. They talk of 'full professionalism', by which they mean English teachers being involved holistically in all aspects of teaching: from curriculum design, to developing practice and assessment methods. They insist practice must be firmly located into the various contexts in which it occurs. They insist on developing children's confidence in their own identities and backgrounds, and they appear committed to children's agency and social justice. They argue professional development opportunities must be available for teachers in and outside the classroom. These conclusions emerged from collective analysis of their individual memories.

To generate a PM of English in this conjuncture required a multi-disciplined approach and I combined life history with collective memory methods. Memory is often viewed from an individualist perspective but I wanted to explore the extent to which it is a socially distributed phenomenon (Gergen 1999). When the individual converges with the collective, memory becomes irreducibly social. Halbwachs (1992) insists memory is a collective social construct and as such it is coloured by a diversity of external influences. Individual memory is unintelligible without the skilful control of socially constructed semiotic tools in a given culture. These tools, bound by history and ideology, supply templates for individuals to narrate and represent what they view as personal, subjective memories. But memory construction is a dialectical, trans-individual process. As such this construction is intensely ideological and submerged in issues of power, language, society and culture (Shotter 1990). Memory essentially replaces and *becomes* previous experience and it allows individuals to envisage how they were in the past (Middleton and Edwards 1990). But when the past is recovered and reproduced through social narrative it is done with particular intentions (Rosen 1998). As Shotter (1990) puts it, we tell our stories 'to constitute and sustain one or other

kind of social order' (123). In this way individuals maintain identity and relationships by drawing on collective memory.

PM is part of collective memory. It is a collectivist enterprise. By taking a collective memory approach to PM it is possible to reveal how groups of teachers wish to be represented, their values, concerns and types of practice they promote. A collectivist and relational approach to PM can help create a greater sense of identity among English teachers by foregrounding common values, missions and motivations. This seems crucial in current contexts where official policy and discourse encourage teachers to compete with one another and to refrain from any serious engagement with the educational past. By offering collective accounts of teacher experience, PM has the potential to help practitioners consider how their attitudes, values, and practices are by-products of social interaction of various kinds. This might help reduce what Gergen (1999) refers to as the 'debilitating gap between self and other' (137). A practitioner history of English, generated through PM, could offer a vantage point from which to consider how dominant discourses influence the construction of professional identity, and thus reveal ways in which this might be challenged. PM can provide not only an alternative history to challenge current discourses, but can also exemplify how practitioners might confront their own backgrounds, conjunctures and contexts.

What Practical Contribution Might PM Make?

PM can help problematise existing theoretical frameworks for English teaching. The current dominant paradigm in English only really makes sense against a background of what in fact turn out to be highly selective views of inherited traditions. At any given point, elements of one, several or indeed all of these traditions might apply. PM can bring forth a wider, more complete sense of English teaching than current dominant perspectives suggest. PM highlights the richness and complexity of previous versions of English, some of which seem today to have been proscribed and air-brushed from accounts of the subject. Thus, work on PM brings to light positions from which to critique, contest and reconceptualise the theoretical frameworks that underpin current versions of the subject.

I turn to Louis Althusser to help explain the potential of PM. In *Reading Capital* (2009) Althusser problematises certain 'epistemological propositions' in Marx's political economy, and he arrives at some theoretical conclusions. Althusser refers to a specific section in Engels's preface to volume two of *Capital*. Engels argues Marx re-imagined the concept of 'surplus-value' in such a new way that it 'struck home like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky'

(165). According to Engels, Marx's genius in generating new knowledge was not to seek *solutions*, but to look instead for *problems*.

This is the point Althusser takes up and he argues Marx initiated a revolution not only in the science of history and philosophy, but also 'in the history of the *theoretical*' (2009, 169). This critical development makes it possible not only to challenge existing ideological perspectives, critical analyses and objective definitions, but also the theoretical bases that underpin them. In this way an existing theory can be critically interrogated and new ones constituted through the dialectical act '*of posing as a problem* what had hitherto been given as a *solution*'; in doing this it is possible to generate a new '*theoretical problematic*' (170).

Objects of study are inevitably defined in particular ways in the history of a given discipline. Such definitions create objective theoretical and social understandings of the objects themselves. Althusser argues Marx's re-constitution of the '*theoretical matrix*' means that new questions put to an object must change '*the reality of the object: its objective definition*'

[t]o cast doubt on the definition of the object is to pose the question of a differential definition of the *novelty of the object* aimed at by a new theoretical problematic. In the history of the revolutions of a science, every upheaval in the theoretical practice is correlated with a transformation in the definition of the object, and therefore with a difference which can be assigned to the *object* of the theory itself. (171)

If the object of the theory is to problematise rather than seek solutions then it follows that the object under scrutiny can no longer exist in its current definition. What is needed to achieve this are new questions generated from a new theoretical problematic. Althusser points out,

To change theoretical base is therefore to *change theoretical problematic*, if it is true that the theory of a science at a given moment in its history is no more than the *theoretical matrix of the type of questions* the science poses its object—if it is true that with a new basic theory a new organic way of putting questions to the object comes into the world, a new way of posing questions and in consequence of producing new answers. (170)

Althusser demonstrates how Marx re-imagined the concept of surplus-value and in doing so reconstituted the problematic in contemporary political economy, thus providing 'an answer which does not correspond to any question posed' (29). By taking this example and applying it here, it might be possible to see how the current problematic in English teaching can be re-imagined for new times. PM has the potential to inspire new, organic questions directed at current conceptions of English that indeed produce new answers: questions that ask not *how* circumstances in English can be improved, but *why* practitioners work in the ways we do?

PM can help English teachers re-imagine and thus re-define the *object* of English teaching. By that I mean the objectified ways in which English is presented, its purposes, practices and conceptions of professionalism. Current official definitions of English were generated out of specific sets of conjunctures and ideologies. They evolved after the re-imagined version of ‘official history’ that McCulloch (2000) highlights. But there are alternative lessons to be learned from practitioner stories located in different periods in the evolution of the subject. English is currently predicated on imperatives such as the National Curriculum, high stakes testing, functional skills, grammar tests, traditional pedagogy and literature, Ofsted and accountability measures. However, the inequitable and limiting effects of these imperatives on the actual lived experience of teachers and children are often dismissed or neglected.

English teaching needs to be contextualised in different ways. Historical contextualisation is essential for practitioners to locate themselves into the traditions, values, practices and developments of the subject. This can create a stronger sense of professional identity and provide a basis from which to agitate for a greater voice in defining the character of the subject—not only its content, but how students are perceived and treated. Previous versions of English, generated through collective PM, can be scrutinised by practitioners and re-imagined for new times. This can inspire critical engagement with current circumstances, contexts, discourses and policy initiatives to help generate a new theoretical problematic in English teaching.

Final Comments

I have not presented any data here because I wanted to explore a conception of PM as a critical line of inquiry. Further articles will explore more fully the data, methods and theory of PM. But PM studies need to be practical. Researchers and teachers need to work collaboratively to develop new questions that challenge current conceptions of English. Studies need to be conducted with teachers from different generations. Building a comprehensive and contextualised PM (including teacher constructions of identity, working cultures, practices, discourses, attitudes and values) would produce robust and much needed evidence with which to challenge dominant discourses. PM studies have the potential to bring research back to the level of the teacher—to make teachers actively involved in defining professionalism on their own terms. By working collaboratively to generate collective life histories, teachers and researchers can critically explore how memory, discourse and conjunctures influence attitudes, beliefs and approaches to practice. Official versions of

English do not allow this to happen and there is no motivation on the part of policy makers to encourage this kind of critical engagement. Teachers and researchers must do it for themselves. If closer links can be made between researchers and teachers through PM, there is real potential that English teachers might have a stronger voice in discussions about their own professional destiny.

Note on Contributor

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