**‘Fire burn and cauldron bubble’: what are the conjunctural effects on English teacher professional memories, identities and narratives?**

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This article explores how circumstances in different conjunctures influence the types of narrative, working practice and ‘Professional Memory’ (PM) that English teachers construct. It is argued that the circumstances in which teachers begin their careers help to formulate attitudes, values and missions that remain potent over long periods. Examining these phenomena from a collectivist perspective makes it possible to uncover the valued ways of working and conceptions of ‘English’ that different generations hold through PM. These memories can provide much needed, alternative accounts of the subject that are both informative and instructive. Here, I concentrate on the PM of one generation of English teachers who began in a distinctive conjuncture – 1965-1975.

**Keywords:** Professional memory; conjunctures; history of English teaching; collective memory; life history

**Introduction**

Starting as an English teacher in particular contexts can provide resources (memories, values, identities, discourses and practices) that remain with practitioners throughout their careers. The alignment of different historical, social, cultural and political circumstances, in specific ‘conjunctures’ (Althusser, 1969), provides distinctive opportunities to develop practice and professional identity. Circumstances in the 1960s and 1970s provided opportunities for some English teachers to be agentive and creative in their approach to the job (see Dixon, 1991; Goodson and Medway 1990; Burgess and Hardcastle, 2000; Ball, Kenny & Gardiner, 1990). Current circumstances encourage homogeneity in practice and professional identity, making it difficult to initiate and sustain alternative practices. By investigating the ‘Professional Memory’ (PM) of English teaching in different periods it is possible to provide practitioners with alternative accounts of practice, attitudes and missions by recovering vital experience. Through this experience today’s English teachers might be energised into critically confronting professional contexts in existing circumstances.

In this piece I will explore the lasting influence of English teachers’ early experience and professional development in a particular historical period – 1965-1975. I interviewed English teachers who began their careers in this conjuncture. Their memories demonstrate a strong collective identity formed in this interval. However, the social, cultural and political effects of this conjuncture are not book-ended by these dates and the collective memories also highlight attitudes and values that have remained for whole careers. This period was chosen because it is often associated with the development and sedimentation of ‘progressive’ or ‘radical’ ideas and practices in English teaching (see Shayer, 1972; Grace, 1978; Ball et al, 1990; Dixon 1991; Burgess & Hardcastle, 2000; Medway et al 2014). Therefore it is useful to think of this conjuncture as a particular ‘cauldron’ in which radical understandings of English teaching were fertilised and fomented. The informants in this study refer to various periods in their careers where the ‘cauldron effect’ of this conjuncture remains explicitly evident – early experience forms the basis for future action.This ‘cauldron effect’ also seems to have provided the informants with skills and resources to generate *agentive* narratives, allowing them to critically re-position themselves in different conjunctures throughout their careers (Goodson, 2013).

Investigating English teachers’ collective PM helps to distinguish how a range of factors influence narrative, memory, identity and practice. Highlighting conjunctural influences can potentially empower practitioners to confront and re-imagine their social roles and various anchor points in their stories, memories and professional lives. Goodson and Gill (2011) argue that by developing an awareness of the ‘multiple landscapes within a person’s own narrative terrain’ (121) individuals can critically re-position themselves, making it feasible to ‘choose a life trajectory more in tune with his/her own nature, identity and perception of his/her purpose in the world’ (121). PM has the potential to provoke this kind of reflexivity in English teachers. To achieve this it necessary to explore the interdependency of narrative, memory and experience in practitioner life histories.

**Narrative, memory and experience**

Life is made sensible through narrative: language constitutes social reality (Gergen, 1999). Bruner (1996) argues we are ‘geniuses at the continued story’; narratives ‘impose coherence on the past, turn it into history’ (143-144). In that case, how can ‘life’ be understood, how is constituted through narrative? Bruner insists on a ‘meta-cognitive sensitivity needed for coping with the world of narrative reality and its competing claims’ (147). To be critically alert individuals must be cognizant of their various narrative realities,

It is not that we lack the competence in creating our narrative accounts of reality – far from it. We are, if anything, too expert. Our problem, rather, is achieving consciousness of what we so easily do automatically. (147)

Gaining such consciousness is difficult, but it is fundamentally a social process. The business of constructing a ‘life’ is done in relation to other people and through the various cultural artefacts available. So while agreeing with Bruner, I stress the social, collective dimensions of PM.

As social constructs narratives not only provide linguistic templates, but also social and cultural expectations about how they are used – what Bakhtin (1986) calls ‘speech genres’. Through social interaction individuals learn how to narrate ‘appropriately’ in different contexts. Once transformed into inner speech these internalisations become memory phenomena. Rosen (1998) argues memories are ‘saturated with social meaning’ when generated into narrative because ‘they must draw on memories of existing texts’ (132). Because of the dialectical nature of this process, Bakhtin insists we inevitably speak with ‘echoes’ of others’ voices. We inherit social, cultural and linguistic templates that simultaneously enable and constrain. In this way Padden (1990) argues that all languages and narratives are fundamentally collective memories. Narrative is underpinned by collective memory, which in turn has its origins in lived experience.

PM is part of ‘collective memory’, which Halbwachs (1992) divides into the ‘historical’ and ‘autobiographical’. Both rely on commemoration to be sustained, but ‘historical’ refers to memory reproduced through officially sanctioned cultural artefacts – written documents, records, histories, photographs, statues, portraits. So individuals have ‘memories’ of events, people or circumstances they may never have encountered (Billig, 1990; Schudson, 1990; Schwartz, 1990). ‘Autobiographical’ refers to memories of lived experience. When memories are accessed and reproduced into narrative they become irreducibly social because they rely on semiotic systems. Any experience has the potential to gain semiotic significance and therefore become expressive, but as Volosinov (1973: 28) insists: ‘experience exists even for the person undergoing it only in the material of signs’. Through ‘the word’ and ‘inner speech’ individuals select and express socially and culturally relevant experience: an intensely ideological process (Shotter, 1990). Therefore ‘memory’ in narrative form is the by-product of complicated, ideologically saturated social interaction; its accumulation influences future action. Middleton and Edwards (1990) argue that by reminiscing, sharing experiences and remembering together, groups produce narratives that extend ‘beyond the sum of individual experience’. What is commemorated in these narratives ultimately ‘becomes the basis for future reminiscence’ (7).

English teaching is located in both historical and autobiographical memory. Official policy documents, histories, heritage, tradition and the canon all constitute the historical. The millions of teachers and students, who have experienced the subject, remember events in their own particular autobiographical contexts. Both types are commemorated in arguments, debates and continuous changes in policy and focus. However, historical memory of English in current contexts is predicated on culturally elitist conceptions of the subject. Versions of English as ‘radical’ or ‘progressive’, particularly between 1965-1975, tend to be depicted negatively in historical memory (Coultas, 2013; Yandell, 2013). Yet the collective, autobiographical memories of my informants tell a more positive and nuanced story of the period. Their experiences of working in this conjuncture provide them with powerful memories and narratives that have helped them maintain a clear sense of professional identity throughout their careers.

There are contradictions and tensions between the historical and autobiographical memory of English teaching. Therefore it is crucial to recover practitioners’ lived experience through autobiographical memory; locating this alongside the ‘historical’ memory of English can create a more comprehensive collective memory for the profession. Generating a ‘Professional Memory’ can recover versions of English that form the ‘basis for future reminiscence’. PM can contribute to the collective memory of today’s practitioners by providing alternative critical accounts from teachers in different conjunctures. The critical examination of narrative, collective memory and lived experience in various conjunctures can help practitioners forge more distinct professional identities and sense of agency.

**Participants and study**

Six participants (Ann, Steve, Michael, Shaun, Liz, David) were recruited because they began their careers between 1965 and 1975. They all worked in London and they represent a range of backgrounds in terms of social class, education and political outlook. They are not representative of all English teachers in this period. They were recruited through purposive, snowball and convenience sampling: methods liable to produce particular effects – a degree of commonality, a level of homogeneity (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Therefore the informants represent a particular *type* of English teacher in the ‘cauldron’ that might be described as ‘progressive’ or ‘radical’. Their collective memories suggest practice was underpinned by an ideological commitment to developing children’s agency and challenging existing definitions of school English. They represent themselves as active agents for professional and social change. To generate their narratives now, they access memories of their early professional development in the conjuncture 1965-1975.

These factors influence the types of narratives they produce. Goodson (2013) argues life narratives can generally be located on a spectrum of ‘description to elaboration’. The ‘descriptive’ end of this spectrum tends to be populated by narrators with fairly low levels of reflexivity and agency. ‘Scripted describers’ seem unaccustomed to thinking critically about their lives. At the opposite end ‘focussed elaborators’ are highly reflexive and flexible. Narrative is used self-confidently to implement a clear ‘personal vision’. Elaborators have the ability to re-position themselves throughout life, with strong narrative identity continuously reconfigured. My informants are highly sensitive to the intentions behind their narratives, which can be read as representing narrators from the *agentive* end of Goodson’s spectrum: elaborators.

To recover the informants’ collective PM I adopted a multi-disciplined approach, combining life history with collective memory methods (Goodson and Choi, 2008). The teachers participated in multiple semi-structured interviews, lasting between 75 to 100 minutes, allowing them to elaborate on their experiences. To understand how memory, identity and practice developed, questions were designed to create what Goodson (1992) calls a ‘genealogy of context’. That is, it is necessary to trace the evolution of various trajectories, proclivities and convictions that constitute the informants’ collective identities. Participants were asked questions focussing on different aspects of their lives and careers. First, questions on their initial experiences of ‘English’, how they were socialised into the subject at home or school before becoming teachers. Next, questions focussed explicitly on early professional practice in the ‘cauldron’ 1965-1975. Finally, questions focussed on attitudes to current circumstances in English teaching. This structure enabled the production of holistic professional life histories. It is possible to consider how the beliefs and attitudes they took into teaching influenced early practice. It is also possible to consider how various circumstances in the ‘cauldron’ influenced their identities, memories, narratives and practices. Finally, after full careers, it is possible to consider how previous experiences contribute to current attitudes.

This piece forms part of a larger study into the informants’ careers, so here I concentrate on selected aspects of their stories – their sense of agency, self-reliance and political engagement.

**Conjunctures and contexts**

It is necessary to say something about the conjunctures in which the informants constructed their attitudes to English and began their careers. The term ‘conjuncture’ is often associated with the *Annales* School in the twentieth century. *Annales* historians re-orientated historiographical approaches away from linear, chronological accounts of past events, concentrating instead on long-term economic and social history: the *longue durée*. Alongside studies of economic cycles over long periods, *Annales* historians identified ‘crises’, marked turning points within the larger patterns, which they called ‘conjunctures’. Braudel (1958) describes the implications of these historiographical changes, where ‘conjunctures’ open up ‘ ’.

In certain periods circumstances coincide that enable various types of change to occur. John Hardcastle (2008: 4) considers such periods as ‘circumstances and the chance intersections that constitute the “milieu” in which events unfold’. Understanding the ‘unfolding’ of events requires the mapping of activities, discourses, intersections and contexts – ‘chiefly it requires uncovering networks’ (15). But change does not happen because of ‘chance intersections’ alone, human agency is instrumental, and for some, the term ‘conjuncture’ takes on radical connotations. For example, Althusser (1969) suggests it is characterised by complex layers of tangled, changeable power relations in a given period. Elaborating the ‘*theory of the particular essence of the specific elements of the superstructure*’ (114) is essential for understanding the complex relations within a conjuncture. If that task can be achieved, then it is possible to examine the effects of various structures, conditions and political interventions. Critical analysis of these effects can highlight contradictions, areas of weakness, that offer exploitable opportunities to force through change.

Such opportunities can be seen in conjunctures where the informants were socialised into ‘English’ and developed identities, attitudes and practices. Being born during or immediately after WW2, their early memories appear to have been constructed at a time of hardship, but also optimism. Cities were literally being re-built; there was rationing and widespread poverty. But it was also a time of ‘make do and mend’, a reliance on communities to ‘muck in’. Ball (2008) explores how distinct ideological shifts in the British State produce different policy initiatives and outcomes. The informants’ memories were generated through their experiences in the period of the ‘welfare’ state, which Ball suggests is characterised by ‘post-war economic growth and the expansion of the middle class’ (57). There was also the move towards ‘universalist welfare state education’ (57). Yet, while the 1944 ‘Butler’ Act provided secondary education for the first time to all children, it was implemented through the tiered and inequitable ‘tripartite’ system (Jones, 2003). And as John Dixon (1991) says of this period: ‘The taken-for-granted structure of education, you might say, was an echo of the class structure’ (149). However, in a time of ‘consensus’ politics, the institutionalisation of the NHS and education system were seen as ways of improving ordinary lives and social justice. For some, education was crucial for the further democratisation of British society (see Simon, 1955; Williams, 1961).

English teaching in the period was influenced by this historic, systemic segregation along class lines. There are examples of progressive practice in the 1950s (see Hardcastle & Medway, 2013; Medway et al, 2014), but for the majority of children tripartism resulted in division rather than social cohesion (Ball, 2008; Simon, 1955, 1994; Williams, 1961; Benn & Simon, 1972; Jones, 2003; Goodson, 1983; Benn & Chitty, 1996). Indeed, the distinct cultures of some grammar and secondary modern schools encouraged social inequality unashamedly – Medway (1990) argues English was designed for different outcomes in each context. By 1958 three quarters of children attended secondary moderns, which,

. . . unambiguously emphasised preparation for subordinate roles in life: the skills and values taught were seen to be such as would produce a useful, responsible and inoffensive citizen with a respect, based on slight acquaintance, for literary culture. In these schools the content of the English lesson might be determined by reference less to a conception of the subject than to the school’s socialising function. (5)

Some groups of teachers, dissatisfied with these circumstances, promoted practitioner-led reform and a democratic re-conceptualisation of the subject (see Medway et al, 2014; Gibbons, 2013). This work set templates for future generations to draw on, and occurred against a backdrop of wider social change. Lowe (2007) highlights dramatic changes in social attitudes because of increasing affluence in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Organised social and political movements demanded solidarity for oppressed groups; there were protests against the Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, and ‘Counterculture’ which generated a sense of militancy that filtered into social institutions, including schools. Lowe suggests: ‘It was hardly a surprise then that what went on in the schools should be seen to be changing swiftly and to be particularly controversial at this time’ (40).

By 1965 events culminated in various kinds of social, cultural and political change. Indeed, Christopher Bray (2014) argues ‘there is Britain before 1965, and Britain after 1965 – and they’re not the same thing’ (xiv). Comprehensive education was promoted; popular cultural movements in art, music and film burgeoned; there was the political will to tackle issues such as racism, homophobia, capital punishment and abortion. A young generation of teachers engaged in political debate and new theoretical perspectives on language and literature. Dixon (1991) recognises different circumstances came together in this period to create favourable conditions for radical change. He claims some young teachers who were ‘combative, rebellious and iconoclastic’ (175) challenged existing orthodoxies and authorities.

The informants began their careers in this ‘cauldron’ and it seems various circumstances came together which saw age-old hegemonies, ideologies and traditions transformed. The attitudes, events and discourses that make up the ‘milieu’ of these conjunctures had a lasting influence on the informants’ identities, memories and working practices.

**Early experiences of ‘English’**

Before exploring the informants’ early professional development in the ‘cauldron’ ‘65-‘75, it is important to consider what attitudes and values they took into the job with them. They are sensitive to the post-war contexts in which they grew up and went to school. Some of them recall teachers who had fought in the war: ‘I think they saw it as an extension of the army in some cases, you know, it was all about drill’ (David). They recall a sense of ‘post-war gloom’ (Michael), or being taught by ‘lots of women who’d lost men in the war. I was taught in a very bleak time I think’ (Liz). Collectively they evoke a sense of general hardship and struggle. However, this period also saw the evolution of the welfare state, the NHS and development of the education system. There was optimism that a better society could be built amid the ‘gloom’ and ‘bleakness’ (Dixon, 1991; Lowe, 2007; Ball, 2008). These wider historical circumstances are referred to in different ways by the informants and seem to have influenced their constructions of identity and attitudes to English. They suggest they wanted to escape the hardship they experienced as children and it emerged that social justice, fairness and a belief in the egalitarian potential of education are major collective characteristics. They seem to have developed confidence in themselves through their early experiences that remains undiminished.

In terms of English, they claim formal schooling hindered rather than helped their abilities. Lessons, regardless of what type of school they attended, were formulaic, traditional and uninspiring experiences. They complain of being ‘wheeled through Janet and John’ (David), and lessons being ‘almost entirely predictable’ (Ann). Michael’s lessons usually involved ‘comprehension, composition and précis, endless précis!’ Similarly, David experienced ‘box analysis and parsing’. Steve recalls ‘English being stunningly boring. It was one of the deadly lessons’. Talk was not part of the agenda either. I asked Liz if she was able talk with other children in English lessons. She appeared shocked – ‘in my school? good heavens no!’ Steve claims ‘you got the slipper or the cane if you spoke’. Again, there is a collective sense of hardship and struggle, and their early experiences seem to have influenced the informants to strive to do a ‘better job’ than those who taught them – ‘The way I was taught was crap and there are better ways of doing it, better ways of relating to people’ (David).

Shaun is the happy exception. He attended a Catholic seminary, which appears to have been more enlightened. He recalls his English teacher being ‘absolutely outstanding, and encouraged discussion and debate and encouraged you to think for yourself’. Other schools at the time also worked in these ways and there are examples in the 1950s of attempts to develop more child-centred practice in English. These developments were influenced by wider social, cultural and political movements. Hardcastle and Medway (2013) foreground Walworth School in London for its pioneering approach. They claim ‘Walworth’s version of English also owed much to the comprehensive school ideal promulgated by the LCC and enthusiastically adopted by the school itself’ (34). Critically alert teachers like Harold Rosen and John Dixon recognised and challenged some of the assumptions of the tripartite system, particularly the damaging idea of ‘fixed’ intelligence. Despite age-old hegemonies and divisions, these teachers exploited a growing post-war desire to create a fairer, more democratic society in this conjuncture. They contributed to a critical and progressive re-conceptualisation of school English, making it more relevant to children’s lives. In doing this they re-imagined the subject and demonstrated models of critical practitioner-led development that would be picked up by subsequent generations.

The informants drew on these models when they became teachers and they demonstrate confidence in their abilities and resourcefulness. They suggest this even from a very young age, claiming they were mostly ‘self-taught’. They all claim to have been able to read prior to going to school, suggesting they were ‘imbued with the spirit of reading…we read very widely from a very early age’ (Shaun) or ‘I think I could probably read fairly well before I went to school’ (David). Steve claims he ‘coasted through school as a social experience’ which was ‘more of a joke and a laugh’. He has ‘absolutely no memory of being *taught* English…I was self-taught’. Ann probably exemplifies the informants’ attitudes when she claims,

 ‘Well, in terms of primary and secondary I really don’t remember anything because whatever was being taught in the classroom I wasn’t listening to it! I had my own agenda, my own supply of books and I always made sure I was at the back of the class . . . But I taught myself.’

Self-reliance and self-learning emerge strongly, and it seems in this period reading and literacy were highly valued in the informants’ families. Along with the developing welfare state and more liberal social attitudes it seems some groups saw education as a way of creating a fairer society and improving life chances, particularly for working-class children. Existing orthodoxies were challenged (See Dixon, 1991; Lowe, 2007) and this spirit seems to have supplied the informants with resilience and assuredness in their abilities to confront and critique social structures. At school, they claim this was enacted through ‘rebelliousness’. They use words like ‘bad’, ‘wayward’, ‘irreverent’, ‘subversive’ and ‘hated’ to describe themselves. Liz claims she became ‘bad’ at school as a response to the ritual humiliation of having ‘marks’ announced in front of peers. David used to write ‘send ups’ of his teachers and pass them round for classmates to laugh at – ‘I’ve always been an irreverent sort of person and I still am’. Steve claims he would openly confront his head teacher: ‘I thought the guy was an absolute prick so I just told him what I thought…I just said it to his face in front of everybody and he hated me’. Again, Ann seems to strike a characteristic note when she claims English matched her own ‘subversive tendencies’ and helped develop her identity,

 ‘I suddenly realised that it was all actually about survival, and it was also about asking questions, and it was about not accepting hierarchical structures…for what they appeared to be doing, but always to question the ways in which they were undermining individuality.’

These are the attitudes the informants claim they took into teaching with them. Despite coming from very different backgrounds, they describe their early experiences in strikingly similar ways. They claim to have had largely negative experiences of English at school, but suggest they had the ability to understand and critique how and why such bad practice existed. They suggest negative experiences spurred the development of positive practice in their own classrooms. Some elements appear stereotypical: rebelling against authority as teenagers or not learning anything of value at school. But they present themselves as critically alert, iconoclastic and active. These autobiographical memories build a collective picture of circumstances, events and action that transcends individual experience (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). The narratives help the informants maintain group identity as critical and agentive individuals. Their stories may not match the reality, but they highlight how these informants wish themselves, and ultimately their work, to be remembered.

**Early practice 1965 - 1975**

The ‘cauldron’ saw school English develop in different ways. New textbooks that appeared around this time offered alternative ideas for practice and a different outlook for the subject (see Clements, Dixon and Stratta, 1963; Holbrook, 1961, 1964, 1967; Abbs, 1969). These writers represent different traditions, but some of them were practising teachers when they produced this work. For some teachers curriculum development was a professional responsibility, with opportunities to design and publish courses. Political attitudes at the start of this conjuncture meant the informants began at a time when professional autonomy and trust were commonly assumed. Labour Education Secretary Anthony Crosland said of the time,

 I didn’t regard myself or my officials as in the slightest regard competent to interfere with the curriculum. We’re educational politicians and administrators, not professional educationists. (Cited in Francis, 2001: 14)

In this atmosphere some practitioners attempted to re-define English. John Dixon’s *Growth Through English* (1967) promoted a radical re-conceptualisation of the subject. Dismissing cultural heritage models, Dixon’s conception of ‘growth’ is firmly located in children’s own social realities. He insists ‘on the need to re-examine the learning processes and the meaning to the individual of what he is doing in English lessons’ (1-2); the idea being that children should ‘grow’ as people through their classroom experiences. Dixon’s model for achieving this focussed on specific developments. He argues the need for a stronger focus on student talk, discussion and drama in learning. Writing activities should allow children to explore ideas and discover meanings for themselves. The processes of thinking and writing are more important than end product, and children’s real lives should be the central starting point for learning. Dixon (48) claims students should be freed from the ‘limits of the teacher’s vision’ of learning outcomes, and language study should see students ‘freed from the *disabling conceptions* of “correctness” and “dialect”’ (77). Instead, Dixon claims a ‘new model will be needed…to redirect our attention to life as it really is’ (114).

Dixon’s ‘growth’ model seems to have had a significant influence on the informants early in their careers. Some of them refer directly to his work, and Liz even produced *Reflections* (1963) at one interview, claiming ‘It was the book that was sort of moving English teaching round when I started to teach’. Alongside developments in practice, wider circumstances in this ‘cauldron’ were influential. The informants often adopt ‘radical’ political discourses when referring to their work. They use words like ‘radical’, ‘militant’, ‘movement’, ‘fight’ and ‘struggle’. To an extent such words might be read as symptomatic of political allegiances. Words like ‘struggle’ for instance, are often associated with a Marxist position. However, they need to be read cautiously – a way of speaking at the time with various intentions behind it. Nonetheless, the informants represent themselves as active agents for change, prepared to challenge the status quo. It seems their ‘rebelliousness’ from school evolved into a more coherent critical consciousness and they emphasise a desire to defend the rights of disempowered or disenfranchised groups. They foreground a commitment to ‘working-class’ or ‘ordinary’ children, to give them a ‘voice’. There is a commitment to social justice, with some of the informants describing themselves as ‘socialists’; Michael suggests he and his colleagues tried to direct ‘teaching practice in the light of our, you know, socialist perspectives, you know about equality and justice and all those sorts of ideas.’

One way they suggest they tried to promote ‘equality’ was by finding out about children’s lives and building positive relationships. They appear uncomfortable ‘labelling’ children in particular ways, and they refer explicitly to how these issues were discussed at the time by the likes of Hargreaves (1967) and Keddie (1971). Ann claims English ‘seemed to me to be intimately bound up with the development of the person, of the individual’. Ann’s focus is interesting here because personal fulfilment is prioritised over ‘skills’ or ‘knowledge’. I asked her how this approach related to formal assessments, and she said,

 ‘But in a way...that didn’t seem to be the point of what we were doing. I mean, I’m sure it was, but *how* *interesting* you see all these years later I can’t remember anything about that. We…were developing a pupil’s ability...to write, to read, to learn and to interact, to, to have a sense of team-work and co-operation. Er, and to question, and to above all be prepared to make a mess of something, to, to make mistakes and then discuss them, not to be condemned for them…and to build on them for further development later. So er, empowerment was, it was a high priority, absolute high priority!’

Ann claims English lessons aimed at developing the ‘person’ are linked ‘of course with happiness, with a sense of purpose, a sense of fulfilment and not the least dimension here of course is relationships’. Ann and Michael draw on a range of sometimes competing discourses. Michael connects practice with ‘socialist perspectives’, ‘equality and justice’, drawing on radical discourses of the time. Dixon’s ‘growth’ model can be heard in Ann’s insistence that practice in English is ‘intimately bound up with the development of the person’. All the informants suggest ‘positive relationships’ are a crucial ingredient of worthwhile practice in English, yet they approach this idea from different perspectives. Ann, Liz and David draw on ‘progressive’ and ‘child-centred’ discourses. Michael, Steve and Shaun draw on more ‘radical’ perspectives.

Another key element to emerge is the informants’ commitment to developing their own resources and methods. This was necessary, they suggest, because of a scarcity of high-quality resources. They claim to have had no interest in ‘working through the course-book’, even though there were ‘some people who used to cling to them and insist on having copies’ (David). Instead, to distance themselves from their own negative experiences in English, the informants introduced themed project work, as David suggests,

 ‘I started introducing themes, so you’d do something, science-fiction or something. It’s old hat now…What we’d do, is as a department, somebody would take an idea and go and develop it. We had a box-file and if people came across anything from a magazine or something they’d put it in there. So if you were the next person to take it out there was stuff for you to work on. We’d work together in that way, pulling stuff together.’

David’s approach was alien to older colleagues who wanted to ‘cling’ to existing methods. However in this ‘cauldron’ it seems traditional ways of working were challenged; ‘parsing and box analysis’ were insufficient for allowing children to develop and ‘grow’. Ann describes her department as ‘a place where the walls were reverberating with activity’ – she worked in similar ways,

‘Er, so for example a topic you know, let’s say the *supernatural* would, would be the enclosing title, and within that there would be opportunities for display work, drama work, writing, research work.’

Ann, Michael and Liz claim they were fortunate to begin in departments that encouraged experimentation and it was possible to develop new materials, methods and curricula. A sense of agency emerges, even for the informants whose first departments were less amenable. David and Steve met with criticism and resistance when promoting new ways of working. This forced them to reflect hard on their approach and develop a clear sense of identity and mission. Steve claims, ‘my experience was always of deep suspicion because there were some of us who saw it as fundamentally challenging the way English was taught’. Steve suggests he engaged in an ideological struggle to re-imagine the subject. Similarly, Shaun had to ‘think very very hard about the kind of educational practice I wanted to engage in’. He recalls the ‘very stultifying experience’ that students in his first school had in English, which ‘brought me up with a kind of jolt’. He recalls an incident that forced him to challenge his own assumptions, inherited traditions and practices,

 ‘I can remember vividly…reading out loud to a class of thirty, bored working-class kids was er, a kind of social control really. And, er, I learned a lot about how *not* to teach!’

Shaun moved schools and found colleagues who were ‘more sympathetic politically’. He began to work more collegially, setting up a ‘curriculum group’ which met regularly to discuss curriculum development in relation to wider social, cultural and political contexts. Indeed, circumstances in the ‘cauldron’ appear to have encouraged some practitioners to generate new practices and force through change. John (24)

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**Current attitudes to English**

When reflecting on current circumstances in English teaching the informants draw on earlier experience to criticise a range of developments, including policy initiatives in recent decades, changes in practice, or the erosion of support mechanisms. Shaun criticises current circumstances, where teachers ‘are primarily a conduit for the National Curriculum’. He suggests there are still colleagues ‘who are sustaining oppositional practices’, but claims ‘I think that in some ways we were much more sophisticated then in how we operated’. He suggests a sense of collectivism and activism has been lost. Ann makes similar criticisms,

 ‘A good teacher professionally now is someone who is delivering what is statutorily there to be delivered. Whereas a professional on earlier experience, and really my preferred definition, is someone who is prepared to innovate and try things out, and document evidence for the success, or indeed lack of success, for a particular enterprise.’

Ann’s ‘preferred definition’ points to a kind of teacher agency, innovation and curriculum development that are absent from current conceptions of the job. Michael talks similarly of ‘full’ professionalism as ‘what’s best for my kids, what might work, what can I do about it, how can I make it happen?’ Instead, he ridicules the ‘weird notion that you write all the objectives up, as though all the objectives were the same for everybody’. Steve laments the loss of ‘self-referencing professional groups, like our own English teachers’ association, our trade unions, our local drama groups, links with parents’. The informants’ experiences have produced a PM of English teaching in the ‘cauldron’ where practitioners were agentive, politically engaged and had a sense of collective identity. This identity foregrounds a sense of self-reliance, an ability to re-position oneself over time and a commitment to collectivist principles. These characteristics are evident when they refer to some of the changes in English teaching in the 1980s and 1990s.

Liz describes the closure of ILEA in 1990 as ‘one of the most wanton bits of destruction *ever*’. She laments the erosion of support structures that have been replaced with ‘accountability’ measures, and she is conscious of clashing ideologies: ‘We didn’t have to contend with the Daily Mail…and that mind-set’. She claims ‘people like Chris Woodhead, and Ofsted, that wasn’t there’. Significantly, she argues that ‘if anybody came in who was an inspector or an advisor, they were *there to help you.*’ Shaun also highlights the changing ideological role of ‘inspectors’. He laughs when thinking about how ‘inspectors began to *be* inspectors and ask for schemes of work and things like this, and they’d have you in and tell you what a scheme of work was’. These developments occurred in a very different, more hostile conjuncture to the ‘cauldron’. Crosland’s insistence on not ‘interfering’ with curriculum gradually diminished and throughout the 1970s the ideological turn to neo-liberalism (Ball, 2008) saw trust in teachers eroded. As early as 1977 Stuart Sexton called for parental ‘freedom of choice’, an ‘independent inspectorate’ and an official ‘minimum curriculum’ (Black Paper, 1977). Geoff Whitty (2002) argues the 1970s saw the role of teachers significantly re-imagined,

…a view emerged in the1970s that teachers had abused this licensed autonomy to the detriment of their pupils and society…Many professional groups and particularly the “liberal educational establishment” of the “swollen state” of post-war democracy came to be regarded as ill-adapted to be either agents of the state or entrepreneurial service providers in a marketised civil society. (66)

By the 1990s practitioner-led development was discredited amid the ideological struggle to enforce centralised curricula and external accountability. Ann claims these developments mean that ‘those opportunities to use the professionals *at their very best* was evident, I don’t think it is now’. Michael also refers back when considering some of these changes and claims ‘nobody would have dared to have instituted that level of state control’. He claims if ‘any power was taken away from local authorities’, colleagues would ‘start talking about Nazis and repression and state control, at that time, *respectable* education officers’. He regrets a perceived lack of political engagement among today’s practitioners: ‘English, it’s sort of limp now; I mean if you look at the politics…people wouldn’t march anymore’. David suggests some teachers in the ‘cauldron’ were politically active in a variety of ways –

 ‘I was active in the Labour Party…I mean at any given time we were marching about something, protesting about something…there was a lot of consciousness…I think people look back and think “oh you know all the protests, it was about teachers’ pay” you know, but it wasn’t. That was part of it but there were lots of other political things going on…a lot of the unions were involved, and we were all fairly active.’

Later in his career David ‘went into teacher training’ and was ‘just sort of shocked about how little political activity was going on’. He recalls an incident when ‘there was a march about student grants’. He said to his students ‘well of course I won’t see you next week…you’ve got the march haven’t you?’ The students were nonplussed, and David laughs ‘they didn’t know what I was talking about…this is a national sort of thing and they hadn’t got a clue’. He even highlights changes to college notice boards, claiming that his time as a student saw boards ‘full of…march against this, march against that, protest here, sit in there’. When he ‘looked at the boards at the college where I was teaching it was all, you know, has anybody got a flat…all sorts of concerns about everyday stuff’. The informants are aware that circumstances in different conjunctures produce different attitudes, discourses and practices. But there is a sense that they urge younger colleagues to be more politically engaged, to locate English into wider contexts so as to critique the effects on practice of policy, ideology and discourse.

Ann claims she would like English teachers to ‘feel more militant…to have a degree of militancy and a degree of determination’ in order ‘for example, to fight head teachers...who are preoccupied with league tables and all the other extraneous rubbish’. The sense of optimism and trust in colleagues from the ‘cauldron’ is retained and there is a suggestion that younger teachers want to ‘react against the prison that’s been put in place since 1988’, as Steve claims. He suggests ‘that a lot of the intuitive feelings of younger teachers…will closely reflect on what my generation was doing’. Ann is similarly optimistic and suggests ‘the spirit of enquiry doesn’t seem to have died a death’ and English teaching attracts ‘people who are determined to carry on with their own creative ways’. But I will leave the last word to Shaun, who sums up the informants’ attitudes,

 ‘I think a lot of people are very dismissive of young teachers coming through, they think young teachers don’t have the same tradition and ideas that we had. Well they don’t have the *same* tradition and ideas but they still have that intellectual capacity for inquiry and challenging, er, prevailing ideas…I’m very optimistic about the future, I’m not actually someone who’s hankering after that past.’

**How might PM be useful?**

The memories presented above form part of a larger study and I have been highly selective in which elements I focussed on here. The narratives suggest these informants wish present themselves as serious, committed and capable practitioners. They locate practice into wider social, cultural, political and theoretical contexts. The lived experience of earlier conjunctures seems to have influenced memories and narratives that retain a powerful resonance. They claim to have used their own bad experiences of English as a spur to develop better working practices as teachers. There is a sense of self-confidence and self-reliance that was generated in post-war circumstances; at a time when literacy seems to have been considered crucial for social progress. Wider social, cultural and political circumstances also contributed to their developing identities and attitudes to English. They claim to have been rebellious at school, which translated into different kinds of activism as teachers. Circumstances in these early conjunctures saw old ideas, traditions and practices challenged, and new ones evolved which the informants drew on when they began working in the ‘cauldron’.

The informants’ narratives have clearly been ‘worked on’ over time but their early experiences seem to form ‘the basis for future reminiscence’ (Middleton & Edwards, 1990). The ways in which they talk about English teaching now is influenced by their experiences in the ‘cauldron’, and they retain particular characteristics from that time – for instance political engagement, or critically locating practice into wider contexts. This retention has allowed them to maintain a collective identity throughout their careers, which has evolved in different conjunctures and remains intensely ideological (Shotter, 1990). The collective autobiographical memories (Halbwachs, 1992; Rosen, 1998) are presented through specific kinds of discourse. They generate ‘agentive’ narratives (Goodson, 2013) and present themselves as resourceful and self-reliant, but also committed to collectivist principles. They draw on radical and progressive discourses in order to challenge dominant ideas in English teaching. The informants suggest they were able to take advantage of opportunities offered to them to initiate change in particular circumstances; this indicates a critical and practical conception of ‘conjunctures’ (Althusser, 1969) through which the informants recognised and challenged various contradictions across a number of contexts.

It is tempting to dismiss these types of teacher testimonials as ‘nostalgia’ for earlier times; some critics differentiate between teacher ‘memory’ and ‘nostalgia’. Hargreaves and Moore (2005) argue that generational experience influences teacher attitudes to ‘change’. Teacher memories, situated in particular historical periods, become increasingly important to older practitioners as they near the end of their careers. Such memories ‘are as much about *generation* as *degeneration’* (132) because they allow practitioners to preserve a sense of themselves as energetic, committed professionals, but also to protect against a sense of decay and finality. ‘Nostalgia’ is not necessarily negative because it represents a ‘process of fulfilling, preserving and protecting the missions and memories of one’s generation [and] draws attention to a positive sense of what teachers are fighting for over time’ (132). Hargreaves and Moore foreground the 1960s/’70s generation as having a strong sense of identity, purpose and mission.

Similarly, David Hartley (2009) suggests the recent policy focus on ‘personalisation’ in education is an attempt to appease older practitioners through the ‘nostalgic revival of child-centred education’. Hartley argues ‘personalisation’ in its current guise appeals to modern individualist and consumerist social attitudes. However, it also serves to provide a ‘safe association with a “progressive” past, which, although no Golden Age, conjures up a nostalgic appeal to those better times whose day is done’ (431). Hartley suggests the label ‘personalisation’ might give ‘the *impression* that something of the progressive era is being resurrected’ (431).

Curiously however, the informants in this study seem explicitly aware of how changing circumstances impact on social realities. Michael is clearly not influenced by this ‘impression’ of progressivism when he argues that ‘personalisation’ is ‘back on the agenda but what does it mean? What does it mean if it’s drowned out, if you have to spend your time coaching kids for SATS?’ Shaun claims it is necessary to exercise caution when having teachers ‘reminiscing’ about the past. Ann points to a sense of ‘never standing still…at no point can you think “oh we’ve been progressive, now we’re where we wanted to be”’. Such reactions do not immediately point to ‘nostalgia’. Also, the circumstances they refer to were actual realties – remember Liz’s claim that ‘if anybody came in who was an inspector or an advisor, they were *there to help you’.*

Yes, there may be elements of nostalgia in the informants’ memories – for the early days of practice, colleagues, ILEA. But this is not the same thing as PM. Where no systematic record of teacher experience exists, PM can help recover representations of practice for future generations: a valuable resource through which to critique current contexts and conjunctures. There are positive and negative implications of nostalgia, and it is important to recognise how it might colour recollection. However, PM studies aim to generate a collective practitioner history rather than an elegy to some idealised past.

Studying the PM of English teaching in these ways makes possible to generate compelling evidence from different practitioners in different conjunctures. Building a comprehensive body of practitioner PM would highlight the various landscapes and trajectories of the subject which can be held up to scrutiny. The collective autobiographical memory of practitioners, when located alongside the ‘historical’ memory of English teaching, can provide powerful evidence to challenge dominant, and sometimes damaging, versions of the subject. It can change the ‘future reminiscence’ of practitioners about the subject. A comprehensive body of PM might provoke practitioners to consider critically their own socialisation in ‘English’, their constructions of identity and the ways in which conjunctural circumstances, discourses and policy initiatives influence their professional lives. This kind of work has ‘transformative potential’ (Goodson & Gill, 2011) for English teachers to forge their own professional future. In these ways PM might help practitioners develop a critical understanding of their narratives in ways that can provoke what Goodson and Gill (2011) suggest can,

 …consolidate a person’s journeys, and allow them to develop a sense of integrity in their overall narrative, uniting past and present experiences and formulating a future trajectory. This kind of consolidation is not in conflict with a transformative agenda. (121)

**Notes on Contributor**

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