This is the published version (version of record) of:

Kamler, Barbara 2003, Relocating the writer's voice - from voice to story and beyond, *English in Australia*, vol. 139, Spring, pp. 34-40.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30002103

Reproduced with the specific permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : ©2008, RMIT Publishing
Voice has been a persistent and recurring metaphor in English teaching. Conceptually, it took centre stage in Australia in the 1980s through writing process pedagogies, where students were advised to find their own voices in writing, teachers were advised to listen to student voices, and a 'clear personal voice' in writing was regarded as the mark of an effective writer (Gilbert 1990, p. 61). Voice has also played a central role in a variety of critical and emancipatory pedagogies where it has been used as a motivation to write, as a mode of politicisation, and as a way to understand and disrupt patriarchy and other oppressive social formations.

While we certainly hear less about the writer's voice now than we did in the 1980s and 1990s, it is timely to ask, is the concept still alive? Should it be? What have we lost, or alternatively, what might we gain by continuing to promote the notion of voice in the English classroom?

Certainly the term voice seems alive and well in a number of recent publications such as a North American volume published by the National Council of Teachers of English entitled *Voices on Voice* (Yancey 1994). This edited collection brings together a number of writing teachers to engage with voice as 'one of the most frequently used metaphors employed in rhetoric and composition' (1994, p. xx). But somewhat surprisingly, the book reveals almost no self-consciousness about the numerous critiques that have been made of voice since the 1980s outside progressive student-centred paradigms. While it provides a useful mapping of a multiplicity of uses of the voice metaphor to see what these enable and constrain 'theoretically, personally, conventionally, pedagogically, culturally, ideologically, technologically' (1994, p. xx), it is also highly problematic, by simply celebrating multiplicity without calling the metaphor of voice into question in any way.

In this article, by contrast, I critically reflect on the way voice has been used in a variety of writing and critical pedagogies. I believe it is no longer possible to naively take up discourses of writing as 'therapy' or 'empowerment,' where the writer's voice is seen to be the mechanism for changing the person and the world. Rather, I argue that we should not use voice as a pedagogic concept – because it disenfranchises many writers, and constructs mythical notions about how writing is learned which privilege those already accomplished in the textual practices and performances of schooling. But I do not wish to throw out the historical impetus behind our use of voice as English teachers – only relocate it.
It seems to me that when teachers say they want to hear the writer's personal voice in a text – or that they are keen for students to find their voice – what they seek is student engagement with the texts they produce. They want students to do more than parrot what others have said, or mindlessly complete required assignments. Some time ago Pam Gilbert (1989, p. 165) described the pedagogic motivation for using personal voice in English classrooms in this way: Personal voice ... is regarded as the guarantee of personal student engagement with the artificiality of schoolwork; of genuine communication between teacher and student in the assignment-dominated classroom; and of connections between writing and learning through an emphasis on personal knowing and personal experience.

Clearly these are valuable goals – engagement, communication, personal knowing – but it is not clear that voice, as a conceptual and pedagogic construct, helps us achieve them. In order to unsettle some of our assumptions about voice, I first offer a selective review of the extensive critique made of voice from critical and feminist poststructuralist positions, including recent efforts to re-theorise voice as multiple, situated and partial. I then argue that we move from metaphors of the body (voice) to metaphors of textuality (story) as they offer a stronger critical framework for teaching writing. In particular, I consider the way textual metaphors allow teachers to foreground the labour of the writer, create a clearer separation between the writer's life and the written experience, and treat all writing (even texts of personal experience) as a cultural representation that can be analysed and remade.

Critiques of voice:
What's the matter with voice anyway?
In the following discussion I examine how voice has been conceptualised and critiqued across a variety of educational and disciplinary sites. While it is possible to review only a small portion of the extensive critique of voice, my aim is to clarify why it is impossible to simply re-instate the notion of voice in the English classroom, without rethinking its origins and effects.

Pam Gilbert offered one of the earliest and most sustained critiques of voice as it was used in secondary English classrooms in her landmark 1989 publication *Writing, Schooling and Deconstruction: From Voice to Text in the Classroom*. Her analysis focused on the way voice was popularised for classroom teachers by writing process advocates Graves (1983) and Murray (1982), but also on the way it has slipped unobtrusively into current thinking about writing through such classic texts as Peter Elbow's (1973) *Writing Without Teachers* or James Moffet's (1981) influential writing program guide *Active Voice*.

Gilbert's argument is that current assumptions about voice have generated confusion about the teacher's role and have impacted negatively on how writing might best be taught. Phonocentric metaphors of personal voice obscure the difference between the writer (she who writes) and the text (that which she has written): text becomes synonymous with student writer and writing is regarded 'as a transparent medium through which the "person behind the text" can be seen' (Gilbert 1989, p. 22). Metaphors of personal voice are thus dangerous, Gilbert argues, because they obscure the process of production of school-work in favour of less tangible concepts such as student expression and creativity. Writing is consequently seen as something students learn – as an idiosyncratic process of discovery – rather than something that can be taught systematically and textually.

Tim Lensmire's (1998) critique of voice, almost ten years later, took up many of the tenets of Gilbert's critique, but was based on an extended comparison between two different conceptions of voice. The first he calls voice as *individual expression*, promoted by advocates of writing workshop approaches such as Calkins (1986), Graves (1983), Murray (1985) and Atwell (1987), who call for students to express their unique selves in writing. The second he calls voice as participation, elaborated by advocates of critical pedagogy, including Freire (1970, 1985), Simon (1987), Giroux (1988), Giroux and McLaren (1989), who call for critical dialogues among students and teachers as a mode of empowerment.

Lensmire recognises a number of strengths in the writing workshop emphasis on voice, in particular its commitment to 'taking students' experiences and meanings seriously, in contrast to traditional pedagogies that often run roughshod over personal meaning in the name of teacher control and convention' (1998, p. 266), and its commitment to a pedagogy of engagement, which gives students agency to actively pursue topics they find compelling and meaningful. However, he also highlights a number of problems, including the dangers of promoting an apolitical imperative to 'find your own voice ... a voice that expresses who you are' (1998, p. 263). The idea that there is a real authentic self that can be expressed in writing is, at best, a partial notion grounded in an Enlightenment conception 'in
which the self is imagined to be stable, coherent, unitary and autonomous' (1998, p. 264).

Lensmire argues, like many poststructural feminist scholars, that to assume a stable pre-existent self that can be expressed in writing is to assume that language itself is simply a tool for that expression, a neutral vehicle for expressing pre-existent meaning. He argues, instead, that writing is a site of struggle where subjectivity and meaning are produced. The act of writing does not simply express a self, but has serious effects on the self that is writing. Further, writers are not isolated individuals who simply pursue personal meaning. They are embedded in social relations of gender, race, class, and sexuality that influence the work of writing and creating a self through that writing.

In contrast to this notion of voice as personal expression, Lensmire argues that voice as participation promoted by critical pedagogy is a less romantic and more politicised conception, grounded in issues of power, difference and struggle. Student voice is central to the goal of empowering students, but the self envisaged by critical pedagogy is multiple and social (not unitary), created out of the cultural resources at hand, including experiences, languages, histories and stories. Voice is thus the starting point, the basis for the collective work to be done 'in the name of social justice, equality and democratic community; and in preparation for and as part of transformative social action' (1998, p. 267).

Within critical pedagogy, student writing about the self is valued because it affirms the student's language and experience, and because it provides texts for the classroom community to examine, critique and learn from. Student writing, however, is not only affirmed and celebrated, it is questioned. A critical interrogation of voice is strongly advocated by critical pedagogies, because the notion of student voice itself is situated within the wider society that privileges certain meanings over others. Within writing workshop pedagogies, by contrast, voice is the goal — the desired endpoint for any given piece of student writing — the criterion by which its success is measured.

While Lensmire favours the more politicised version of voice theorised by critical pedagogy, he also critiques its failure to embed student voice in the immediate local contexts of the classroom — and to engage with what the conflict of voices (between students, students and teachers and within the individual student) means for the production of writing in schools. This is a point elaborated by a number of post-structural feminist scholars who take an even more critical position on the notion of voice than Lensmire.

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1992), for example, drawing on her attempts to practice anti-racist pedagogy in the university classroom, critiqued voice as a dehistoricised, abstract notion that does not engage with a politics of difference. She argues that while critical pedagogy shares some of the assumptions of those working from anti-racist and poststructuralist feminist positions,

it does not confront the ways in which any individual student's voice is already a 'teethgritting' and often contradictory intersection of voices constituted by gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or ideology. Nor does it engage with the fact that the particularities of historical context, personal biography, and subjectivities ... render each expression of student voice partial and predicated on the absence and marginalisation of alternative voices. (1992, pp. 103–4)

Mimi Orner's (1992) critique of voice focuses particularly on its failure to acknowledge and work with difference. Orner argues that '[s]tudent voice, as it has been conceptualised in work which claims to empower students, is an oppressive construct — one that ... perpetuates relations of domination in the name of liberation' (1992, p. 75). 'When Anglo-American feminist and critical pedagogues call for students to find and articulate their voice, they ... deny their own subjectivity, their own positionality, the partiality of their own voices' (1992, p. 86). They see themselves as empowered to help students value their own language and background, but never imagine that their own modes of teaching need to be scrutinised or that they may themselves 'contribute to the racism, ethnocentrism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and so on that their students experience' (1992, p. 87).

Orner, like Ellsworth, suggests it is naive to think there can be anything like a genuine sharing of voices in the classroom. 'What does seem possible ... is an attempt to recognise the power differentials present and to understand how they impinge upon what is sayable and doable in that specific context' (1992, p. 81). The desire of the teacher to empower students to voice their silenced experience often fails to see power itself as 'productive and present in all contexts, regulating all discourses and social interactions' (1992, p. 83), even those that are liberatory.

Other feminist scholars have argued that asking students to publicly reveal information about their lives and cultures in the presence of others — including teachers — is at best voyeuristic, and at worst a danger-
ous form of surveillance to see if students produce the right voice. When students speak or write, Ormer asks, whose interests are served? Anneliese Kramer-Dahl (1996) raises similar questions in the context of her university composition and basic writing class.

How can we assume that a pedagogical practice which asks students to make public information about their experiences and cultures in the presence of others could ever grant them a safe, egalitarian place in which to speak? ... arguing for such a practice skirts the issue of who, in the classroom, has the authority to judge what kind of experience counts as relevant and what kind of reading of it is ‘correct’. (1996, p. 251)

A number of similar critiques of voice have also emerged from fields such as curriculum theory and teacher education, where there is an impetus ‘to understand curriculum as political, racial, gender, phenomenological, and autobiographical text’ (Pinar 1997, p. 82). Andy Hargreaves (1996), for example, has critiqued the literature on teacher’s voice for its tendency to essentialise and eradicate difference. This discourse works by selectively appropriating particular empirical voices of predominantly humanistic, child-centred teachers, then condensing them into a singular voice, the teacher’s voice, which becomes representative of all teachers’ (1996, p. 13). Hargreaves is particularly critical of the tendency to moralise and romanticise teachers’ voices – to selectively appropriate and decontextualise ‘only those voices that broadly echo our own’ (1996, p. 13) and ignore those voices that differ or even offend.

While Hargreaves believes it is important to represent teachers’ voices in educational research and practice, he argues against an apolitical presentation that simply celebrates voice, much as we might do for student writing. He emphasises instead the need to represent teacher voices critically and contextually and ensure that many voices are selected, even those that have discrepant things to say about teaching and learning.

Beyond critique: Where to from here?
This brief review suggests there is wide and pervasive interdisciplinary concern about voice as concept and pedagogy that cannot be ignored by those of us located in and around English classrooms. The arguments offered can be distilled into two major points. Firstly, that any use of voice requires alternative methodological, pedagogical and theoretical frameworks to those used in the past. Secondly, that any re-conception of voice must pay closer attention to the social and historical contexts in which classrooms are located — not as abstract sets of relations — but as complex intersections of cultural histories, multiple identities, institutional constraints and shifting power relations between students and teachers and between students.

It must be said, however, that the weight of such critique raises serious questions about the basic adequacy of the voice metaphor altogether for the teaching of writing, particularly socially critical approaches to writing. Put bluntly, if voice is an ‘oppressive’ and problematic construct, why use it? Some scholars have attempted to solve the ‘voice problem’ by adopting the notion of multiple voices, what Kramer-Dahl calls ‘a corrective move through pluralisation’ (1996, p. 256).

We are familiar in English with the pluralisation of almost everything – new literacies, new technologies, multiliteracies, new times, new kids, new Englishes. Yet I am not convinced a full expression of multiple voices solves the problem of ‘authenticity’ and ‘real’ that attach themselves to voice, because in the end, as Pam Gilbert (1989) pointed out long ago, voice is itself a metaphor of the body — located in the throat and vocal chords — and therefore difficult to disconnect from the body of the person writing. Metaphors of speech, because they imply delivery by a human voice, act discursively to naturalise personal writing as authentic ‘individual, spontaneous, natural, truthful, involved, emotional, real’ (Gilbert 1990, pp. 60–1). They also obscure the labour involved in producing writing, because voice signals natural expression which is effortless – just like speaking – something you have rather than learn. The implication is that some students have it, some don’t; some can find it, some can’t. Like magic. Or fate.

In the end, the impossibility of disconnecting the voice metaphor from discourses which locate it inside the person as authentic — their true voice — is demonstrated by Lensmire himself, despite his insightful critique of voice in the writing classroom. Lensmire proposes the metaphor voice as project as an alternative to the writing workshop conception of voice as individual expression or the critical pedagogy conception of voice as participation. His aim in using the term project is to create a ‘sense of student voice as dynamic or in-process’ (1998, p. 278), as requiring development and crafting rather than being ‘already-finished’, or ‘frozen at the beginning of the educational process’ (p. 279). Further, he focuses on struggle, conflict and appropria-
tion to more adequately represent the interactional and ideological complexities of writing classrooms. Lensmire’s metaphoric revision, however, equivocates on the relationship between voice and self by asserting that ‘voice is an aspect of the self but not the whole self’ (p. 287). But this begs the question which aspect? and with what consequences? particularly when he remains committed in his conclusion to a possibly romantic ‘flourishing of student voices in school’ (p. 261).

As a feminist linguist and critical discoursist who takes seriously the power of metaphor to shape what it is possible to think, it seems to me more prudent at this point in time to not use the metaphor of voice. For despite a million useful critiques and revisions of voice as multiple, partial or even socially situated, the metaphor itself stays intact when we continue to use and reuse it. This is not to dismiss the significance, history or even some of the goals associated with the use of voice in a number of critical, democratic and emancipatory projects. It is to argue that we need other discursive means and other metaphors to disrupt the link between person and voice — and voice and authentic experience.

From voice to story
Madeleine Grumet’s (1990) dissatisfaction with the use of voice as a metaphor for feminist theory and pedagogy led her to offer a more complex construction, consisting of three elements: situation, narrative and interpretation.

The first, situation, acknowledges that we tell our story as a speech event that involves the social, cultural and political relations in and to which we speak. Narrative, or narratives as I prefer, invites all the specificity, presence and power that the symbolic and semiotic registers of our speaking can provide. And interpretation provides another voice, a reflexive and more distant one. (1990, pp. 281–2)

In Grumet’s conception no element of this trio is privileged; all are required for a ‘dynamic, reflective, and finally collaborative version of voice’ that might ‘generate new ways of teaching and schooling’ (p. 282). In the context of a pedagogy of writing, I would argue this movement from voice to story is significant — both in terms of metaphor and practice. Metaphorically, story allows a more textual orientation than voice; a closer attention to what is written — to the actual text — and the contexts in which it is produced. Where voice relies on metaphors of sound and speech, without necessarily invoking either context or meaning, story invokes a text, a syntax and a structure of telling.

The last ten years has seen a burgeoning interest in story and narrative across a wide range of disciplinary contexts (education, composition, sociology, literacy) as a framework for understanding the construction of knowledge in relation to lived experience (Tierney & Lincoln 1997). While the range of theorising on narrative as a research methodology, a pedagogy and a mode of curriculum inquiry is too vast to explore here (see for example Thomson 1997–8), I would argue that the construct of narrative allows for a kind of specificity, agency and analysis that constructs of voice do not.

Stories are specific rather than abstract, they ‘arise out of specific rhetorical situations, cultural contexts and historical moments: they are relative to time, place, gender, race, ideology’ (Summerfield 1994, p. 180). Stories do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it. Stories are partial, they are located rather than universal, they are a representation of experience rather than the same thing as experience itself (‘not authentic’).

I opt for the construct of narrative because it allows for a more textual orientation than voice and offers a different treatment of both the person (who writes) and the text (they write). This focus on text was foregrounded by Pam Gilbert back in 1989 when she argued for a move from voice to text (the actual subtitle of her book). Gilbert’s re-vision placed central emphasis on textuality and intertextuality — on the ways in which texts are constructed and readings produced. She placed the making of text centre stage because it demystifies much of what is commonly offered as classroom writing practices. In a similar move, I would argue that textual metaphors are productive for the kind of critical writing pedagogy I advocate and have elaborated elsewhere (Kamler 2001), because they allow teachers to foreground practices of representation, labour and analysis in the English classroom.

With regard to representation, a clearer separation can be made between the writer’s life and the experience she is writing about. What the writer produces is a text, a story, that comes from her but is not her. The construct ‘story’ offers a strong theoretical basis for helping teachers separate life from text, the student’s personal experience from its representation on the page. Summerfield (1994) puts it this way:

As teachers ... we can usefully distinguish the life from the text, the events being represented, the ‘what happened’, from the procedures for representing what
happened – the textual options. We ask students, then for their texts, not their lives. The distinction is crucial: the discourse is not the event. It is not real life. To distinguish event from discourse is to ... foreground in the classroom, questions about how and why we remember, how writing transforms memory, and how discourse arises out of the writing or telling situation. (Summerfield 1994, p. 183)

When teachers foreground all writing as a representation, not the truth but a version, it becomes possible to ask students writerly questions about the personal without critiquing the writer's life. Teachers can ask how students have portrayed experience, and examine with them which aspects are included, excluded, emphasised, metaphorised and with what effects.

With regard to labour, metaphors of textuality make the labour of the writer more visible and less naturalised than metaphors of voice. If stories are constructed, if they are made rather than found, they ostensibly can be remade and rewritten by students. This allows teachers to foreground the craft of writing as social and textual construction – to actively engage with students on the page, not through teacherly margin notes or a running monologue at the front of the classroom, but by showing, by taking student texts apart and putting them back together. The aim is to create greater agency for the writer and reposition her as a textworker, someone who can work actively and consciously (first with more, later with less, assistance from the teacher) to shape the body of a text.

Finally, with regard to analysis, metaphors of textuality foreground the power of stories as interpretative resources for dealing with the everyday world and taking ourselves up within the cultural storylines available to us. This allows teachers to frame the personal as learned cultural practice, which can be analysed in relation to cultural contexts of production, rather than simply celebrated or surveyed for the right/wrong voice. Teachers can use linguistics in this analytic work for examining the ways in which discourses speak in and through the writer, and for the way students can build authority as they write onto the (never neutral) page.

These include a greater self-consciousness about how stories are told, how they are made, how they might be written differently, how they support, undermine and struggle with other stories, how their writing affects both the teller and the told.

Of course, all metaphors have their problems and I am currently worried about the way story is being used as well – particularly when it is stripped of the kind of critical framing I have foregrounded in this article. It is possible that when teachers say to students 'tell us your story', 'we really want to hear your story', they are simply substituting 'story' for voice, and opting for an atheoretical celebration of student voices in the classroom. I have attempted in this article to demonstrate why it is no longer tenable to take up naive notions of voice – indeed, why it may be dangerous to do so.

In the end, it is possible that story may not be the right construct either, but one thing is clear. Whatever term we opt for needs to be textual – foregrounding questions of representation, labour and analysis. Such a text-based conceptual framework allows a more agentic role for teachers of writing and makes the craft of writing itself more accessible to students. There are good reasons why we should not mourn the loss of voice. While we may not want to throw out the personal engagement that can come from writing with what we have in the past called 'voice', it is clear we need other discursive and pedagogic means to achieve this engagement.

References


