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Professional Standards: Maintaining a Critical Stance

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A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses ... a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.

Karl Marx (nd Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Volume 1, p.77)

Abstract
The following article asks whether professional standards can provide a framework for practitioner inquiry and the renewal of the English teaching profession in Australia. This is in contradistinction to managerial pressures to impose standards for regulatory purposes. The article draws on research conducted for PRIME (Portfolio Research in Mathematics and English), a collaborative project involving members of the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association and the Mathematics Association of Victoria. PRIME was designed to explore the professional learning which English and Mathematics teachers experienced as they prepared portfolios within a standards framework. This article focuses on the experiences of one English teacher who participated in the project.

1. Resisting the fetish of standards
To begin by citing Marx’s Capital may be a foolhardy gesture, given that two fairly prominent aspirants to the position of Prime Minister of this country appear to think there is political mileage in attacking teachers who are supposedly old lefties. Surely I am giving myself away as an unreconstructed baby boomer, someone who came to political consciousness during the Vietnam War, who vowed to maintain his rage when Gough Whitlam was dumped from office, and who has since corrupted the minds of countless students who have sat in his
English classes. Yet in thinking about my research on professional standards over the past few years, it struck me that Marx’s famous meditation on the ‘mystery’ of the commodity provided a convenient way of capturing the impetus of my work, including the research which I have been doing with Barbara Clarke and Alan Bishop on Portfolio Research in Mathematics and English (PRIME).

Those of you who have read the opening sections of Capital know that Marx spends quite a bit of time reflecting on how things which are qualitatively different, such as 20 yards of linen, 1 coat, 10 lbs of tea, 40 lbs of coffee, etc., could all be exchanged for the same amount of money (see Marx, p.75e might equally well ask how professional standards could render the professional practice of (say) a teacher working with Indigenous students in a remote settlement in Western Australia as equivalent to the work of an English teacher in a private school in a leafy suburb in Melbourne. Any statement about ‘accomplished’ or ‘excellent’ teaching must inevitably struggle with the deeply contextualised nature of teachers’ work. Such statements always run the risk of being no more than empty generalisations that fail to capture the specific characteristics of professional practice as it is enacted in different school communities.

But the nub of the analogy between professional standards and Marx’s reflections on the nature of commodities lies in his distinction between treating the commodity as a thing (something to which you do no more than attach a dollar sign) and apprehending it as a product of human labour, and; what is more, the collective labour of workers gathered together in factories. Standards, as Tony Petrofsky and Ginette Delandshere observe, are typically a product of the deliberations of small groups of teachers who are recognised experts in their fields (Petrofsky and Delandshere 2000). These people come together to debate the complexities of professional practice, asking what constitutes accomplished teaching. They draw on their experiences to produce statements that supposedly capture such accomplishment, which are then published and disseminated as (to borrow the language of standards statements) what accomplished teachers ‘should know and be able to do’ (see Ingvarson 1998a, p. 33; 1998b).

Yet while those teachers who have been party to the discussions that produced the statements of accomplished practice might identify with and even feel ownership of them, those teachers who have been ‘outside’ this process inevitably view those statements differently. The human activity that went into the formulation of the standards is not visible to them. Instead, they are faced with typically unaudited statements of principle that have been shorn of the debates and deliberations that gave rise to them. To borrow Marx’s language, the social relationships that formed the context and (arguably) now assume, in the eyes of those teachers who have not had the privilege of participating in the formulation of those standards, the fantastic form of a relationship between things. The professional knowledge and practice of teachers are reified into what accomplished teachers ‘should know and be able to do’, and in some hands they even assume the status of benchmarks against which the practice of individual teachers can be measured. Standards development is usually accompanied by a flurry of activity devoted to finding ways to measure teaching practice, as though this is the natural extension of formulating professional standards (see Kleinhenz and Ingvarson 2004; see also Delandshere and Petrofsky 2001). Key questions about the nature of professional standards, including whether they adequately capture the complexities of professional practice as teachers experience them in distinct settings, simply go begging. Paradoxically, although standards are often the product of vigorous debate (put a bunch of teachers together and you are bound to get a lively exchange of views), they are then located in a neutral realm beyond contestation.

This, at least, is one possible scenario, involving a recasting of teachers’ work along increasingly managerial lines, as something that can be abstracted from the contexts in which it occurs and measured to determine its effectiveness (cf. Mahony and Hextall 2000).

Now, I am merely following the logic of a certain take on professional standards, and I do not wish to sound unduly negative about their capacity to provide a framework for professional renewal. My experience of participating in the development of the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA) cant phase in my own intellectual life, and I do not need to be convinced about the value of teachers coming together and jointly constructing knowledge about the complexities of their professional practice (cf. Mercer 1996, Clark 2001). The teachers who became involved in STELLA properly arrived at generalisations about their work (i.e. a set of professional standards) by drawing on the professional experiences they shared with one another, and they subsequently put those generalisations into circulation.
for others to consider. How could the professional experience of teachers achieve status as 'knowledge' unless it was circulated in this way? My concern is that (in contradistinction to the kind of scenario I have sketched above) professional standards continue to provide a focus for this kind of inquiry into teaching and learning, and that teachers who did not participate in developing the standards should nonetheless feel that they can use them to explore aspects of their professional lives. These 'outsiders' should be able to connect with professional standards in equally meaningful ways to the 'insiders' who formulated them.

This was more or less the starting point for the Portfolio Research in Mathematics and English (PRIME) project exploring 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives on the implementation of professional teaching standards. We took the distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' from the essay by Petrofsky and Delandshere (2000) that I have already cited (a distinction which Petrofsky originally developed in an earlier essay for a special issue of *English in Australia* focusing on professional standards – see Petrofsky 1998), and began exploring how Mathematics and English teachers who had not participated in developing the professional standards which had recently been published by the Mathematics and English associations (i.e. teachers who were 'outsiders' to this process) might engage with those standards. The research proposal that we originally submitted to the Australian Research Council noted that the standards which had been developed by the Mathematics and English professional associations were the products of specific discursive communities and that they therefore remained open to critique. We continued:

Questions can be raised about inclusion and exclusion, as not all teachers choose to belong to a professional association. In significant respects, the validity of the 'knowledge' and assumptions embedded in the standards still needs to be tested, most notably with respect to the way teachers who have not been involved in formulating the standards (i.e. who have been 'outside' this process) interpret and apply them to their own teaching practice. Thus the key question that motivates this project is how do teachers of Mathematics and English interpret and apply the professional standards developed for them by the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers (AAMT), the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AAATE) and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA).

Our prime intention is to investigate to what extent the standards documents actually provide a valid frame of reference for individual teachers of Mathematics or English to review their practice and engage in professional development that is personally meaningful to them (Doecke, 2001). The teachers will submit portfolios items for assessment, and we shall explore the ways their assessors reach judgements about the validity of those items as evidence of accomplished teaching. We shall not only be investigating how adequately the teachers are able to construct accounts of their teaching that show they have accomplished the standards, but testing the validity of the standards as representing the domains of teacher knowledge and practice. We shall thereby open up many assumptions underpinning professional standards and portfolio assessment for scrutiny (most notably those underpinning the National Board for Professional Teaching Standard in the United States).

(ARC Linkage Project 2003–2005: Developing portfolio assessment in English and Mathematics: Insider and Outsider perspectives on the implementation of professional teaching standards)

You can see that, although we were staging a process that some see as the logical extension of formulating professional standards (i.e. you develop professional standards and then devise ways of using them to measure the professional practice of individual teachers), we were doing more than conducting a pilot study to test the validity of protocols for teachers to prepare and assess portfolios against the standards. Our aims were – to quote again from our ARC application – *to investigate and document the meanings and processes involved in the development of portfolio items by teachers of English and Mathematics (the 'outsiders') that demonstrate professional accomplishment in terms of their respective standards*, and *to investigate and document the meanings and processes involved in the assessment of the portfolio items by trained portfolio assessors (i.e. the 'insiders').* We were committed, in short, to tapping into the experiences of both 'outsiders' and 'insiders' as they reflexively monitored their participation in this type of assessment activity. For us, it was important that this was not high stakes assessment of the kind performed by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, when questions about the quality of the professional learning actually experienced by teachers seeking certification go begging, and everyone focuses on observing protocols that are legally defensible and which teachers who are submitting portfolios accept. We wanted to crack the nut of such conventions, throwing them into a critical perspective by capturing the meaning that participants actually ascribed to them.
Three years on, we have now begun to analyse the data gathered from both ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ as they engaged in this assessment process and to draw out its implications with respect to professional standards and their uses. What I am about to offer you are reflections prompted by my experience of working with the English teachers who participated in this project, both an ‘outsider’ who prepared a portfolio – Louise Piva, a teacher who works in a state high school in a south eastern suburb of Melbourne – and the ‘insiders’ who assessed the portfolios. This should give you an insight into the processes of interpreting and applying the standards that the project set out to record. I should add that what follows is my viewpoint, and that I am not speaking on behalf of my co-researchers. One of the interesting aspects of our project has been the way it has brought an English educator (i.e. me) into dialogue with two Mathematics educators (namely Barbara Clarke and Alan Bishop). We have ourselves been challenged to develop a reflexive stance as we have engaged in this research, including the histories of our involvement in developing professional standards – I was one of the researchers involved in STELLA, whereas Alan and Barbara played key roles in the development of the Mathematics standards – and the contrasting perspectives that we developed through participating in these projects. However, in this article I shall put the question of how the Mathematics and English teachers differed in their approaches to portfolio assessment to one side.

2. STELLA – ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives

It would be fair to say that teachers from around the country who have participated in STELLA have maintained a critical perspective on professional standards, even as they have engaged in debate about what accomplished teachers ‘should know and be able to do’. I have written about this elsewhere (see Doecke 2001a, 2001b, 2004, Doecke and Gill 2000, Doecke, Gill and McLenaghan 2000, Doecke, Locke and Petrosky 2004, Doecke 2005), and so I won’t go into detail here, but I could cite dozens of statements by English teachers interrogating the meaning of professional standards and how they might impact on their professional lives.

Such critical reflection has paradoxically lent considerable momentum to STELLA. Mark Howie, for example, in a narrative that was eventually published as part of the STELLA website, begins his story about working in a disadvantaged school in Sydney by saying:

To teach is to live with guilt. That will be obvious to anyone who has ever taught. I know very well that I’m not the only Charlie, possessed of a religious faith or otherwise, to have come home with chalk under the fingernails at the end of the day feeling that I could have been a little better prepared, that I could have made a much greater effort to make my lessons more engaging, or that I could have been a little more patient with that student with learning difficulties who had been pressing my buttons. So it is that I can’t escape from the feeling that the much vaunted ‘reflective practitioner’ ...(who is) supposedly the very model of an English teacher, in some part signifies a call to the profession to begin flagellating ourselves with the bars and of our perceived weaknesses and failings, which we will soon be able to masochistically soak in the brine of professional standards...’ (Howie 2002, p.25)

Karren Philp similarly investigates the ways the statements about accomplished English teaching in STELLA connect with her experiences as an English teacher. Picking up standard 1.1, ‘Teachers know their students’ (a typical standards declaration).

is, for me, an aspiration, not ever fully achievable for each and every student I teach. I think I have reached its measure of accomplishment with some of my students each year. And, as I built my knowledge about some students, then perhaps I was also able to apply my learning about those individuals to some generalised groupings of students, and perhaps these generalisations more often have been useful, and counterbalance the times when such stereotyping blinded me to the exceptions and the uniqueness of each individual student. Generalising allowed me to develop broader, deeper and critical understandings about the ways different kinds of students learn English. I have learned different approaches for ESL and ESD learners; for boys who think English is for gals; for girls who think having a baby at 16 will put them on easy street; for whip smart children whose parents have ensured they are rich in cultural capital and for kids from families who struggle with poverty. I have learned different ways to teach different kinds of adolescent students, who mostly believe they are powerless, to see that if they can control their language – then they also control the meaning making systems that will allow them to control their lives.

(Philp 2005, pp.5–9)

Karren concludes her account of her experiences of teaching English by saying that she has never acquired ‘a certainty that I know all I need to know about subject English’. A major contributor to the development of STELLA, she continually reflects on her professional learning within the framework it provides. However, she has come to the paradoxical conclusion -
paradoxes abound when you think about professional standards (cf. Doecke and Gill 2000) – that, while 'every contact simultaneously builds my capacity to be a STELLA teacher', it also 'assures me that I will never know all there is to know, and therefore will never attain the ultimate degree of accomplishment that STELLA describes'.

Given the critical stance taken by these STELLA 'insiders', it has been interesting to note how, as an 'outsider', Louise Piva has similarly used the aspirational statements that constitute STELLA as a prompt for inquiring into her professional practice. Louise had already received considerable professional recognition prior to joining PRIME, but rather than finding that STELLA confirmed her identity as an accomplished English teacher, she declared in an interview at the end of the first year of the project that:

I have more concerns and questions about my ability as a teacher than I think I've ever previously had. Because I think I'm sitting down going: what am I doing? why am I doing it? and what is the result? And this project has forced me to do that ... I would love every teacher to have to go through this process. I know I've done it voluntarily. It's really forced me to say 'Yes, I do that really well as a teacher or I don't do that well', and focus more on my teaching. I think a lot of teachers get really caught up in like administrative type things like taking on extra positions. Like I'm a student council organiser, so you know I get really caught up in that, and then they forget their teaching, or they're coordinator and they get caught up in coordinator duties and forget they're teaching. It's really brought me back to why I started this job and why I actually went into teaching. And I think it's the best thing I've ever done, it's the most valuable professional development. Even though sometimes I've gone: 'Oh my god, I don't really want to know that about myself or my teaching', and you know like 'I'm really failing this student and I can't do anything about it or I don't know what to do ...'

This kind of 'inquiry stance' (to borrow a phrase from Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2001)) is reflected in the autobiographical narrative which Louise used to frame her portfolio (also published in this edition of English in Australia), where she describes her experiences as an early career teacher in Queensland, including her struggle against streaming and labelling students according to their abilities.

Now, much of this is interesting, not least because Louise implicitly resists using her portfolio as a vehicle to demonstrate her individual accomplishment. Her initial choice of aspects of her professional practice on which to focus was largely dictated by her sense of where she needed to improve her teaching. An early interview shows that she saw her participation in PRIME largely in the form of an action research project. She was especially concerned about the criteria she was using to assess students' writing:

Louise: I'm not really happy with the criteria because it's standardised throughout the school. I'm not happy with the ones that we've been using. I don't feel they're detailed enough for the students...

Interviewer: Do you think there will be benefits in the process (of assembling a portfolio)

Louise: I hope so. I hope that the construction of what we teach in class and the way we assess students and what students actually get out of what we do will include ... I mean this whole school is in a state of curriculum change at present. And we're all addressing what we're doing in class and making it more appropriate and better for the students. And I'm hoping that my participation in this project will actually start to focus us on those things, and give us a point of where to and what to now...

Louise obviously sees her portfolio as more than an opportunity to project an image of sparkling accomplishment, as typically happens when people seek promotion or a position at another school. Her use of the first person plural ('we') shows that she locates her teaching within the professional community of her school rather than conceiving it purely as a matter of her individual accomplishment.

Taken together, Louise's autobiographical narrative and the transcripts of interviews conducted with her during the time that she was preparing her portfolio show a teacher whose professional knowledge and practice are shaped by a conflict between existing conditions and her desire to find a better way of doing things. Her autobiographical narrative (which she wrote when she was finally trying to bring her portfolio together as a coherent document) describes her struggle with an English coordinator over the issue of streaming. As an heroic tale (cf. Swidler 2001) showing her battle with the powers-that-be, Louise's story affirms the need to maintain a critical perspective. By recounting her struggles with traditional school practices, she implies a view of professional 'accomplishment' as involving a capacity to critique the policy environment in which she is operating. Like Karen Philip, Louise reads the standards as comprising an understanding of the complexities of English teaching as a professional field and a statement of shared values and beliefs that are larger than any individual teacher's personal attributes. STELLA embodies for Louise a vision of 'accomplished' practice.
that nobody could possibly sustain on a daily basis. As with Karren, her professional life has been shaped by a tension between what 'is' and what 'ought' to be. Her knowledge, values and aspirations have emerged out of a process of trial and error, of occasional misjudgements and continuing professional learning.

The tensions revealed by Louise's comments raise many questions that are not asked when advocates of professional standards argue the value of requiring teachers to produce portfolios that demonstrate their professional accomplishment. How can portfolios, when they are used to measure an individual teacher's performance, continue to provide a vehicle for practitioner inquiry of the kind that Louise describes? To measure accomplishment 'against' a set of professional standards (cf. Delandshere and Arens 2003) threatens to leave teachers anchored in the present rather than enabling them to step into the future. Preparing a portfolio becomes a matter of strutting your stuff against a set of descriptors (which are themselves merely generalisations about existing practice), rather than giving teachers an opportunity to reconceptualise aspects of their professional practice and to see their work differently.

Louise's mention of her relationships with her colleagues and their joint efforts to inquire into their professional practice should prompt critical reflection as to whether professional standards and portfolios provide the best means to facilitate such inquiry. Portfolio production easily becomes a managerial process that (at best) distracts and (at worst) undermines teachers' capacity to address the needs of their students. How might teachers working in a school address the issues that Louise raises? What might produce the kind of critique and professional renewal that she envisages? Does celebrating the accomplishments of individual teachers provide the basis for such renewal? Should not teachers be attempting, instead, to get better at the kind of collaborative inquiry and reflection that might lead to whole school change? The logic of thinking that professional standards inevitably require assessing the performance of individual teachers reflects neo-liberal assumptions about the nature of individuals and society. We have surely reached a moment in history when we ought to be trying to imagine alternative ways of being in the world (cf. Doecke and Parr 2005).

3. The assessors' experience
The 'insiders' who came together to assess the portfolios had all been extensively involved in STELLA, and unsurprisingly their views about judging the portfolios as representations of professional practice were formed by their experiences of the original project. They were very mindful of how any example of professional practice is shaped by the specific context in which it occurs, and they were sensitive to the ways that their readings of the portfolios might reflect their own professional biographies, including the cultures of the school communities in which they had worked. They held strong reservations about the validity of assessing an individual teacher's performance against a set of standards, preferring to think of the STELLA domains (professional knowledge, professional practice, professional engagement) as describing a space that teachers might occupy in different ways, depending on the specific nature of his or her circumstances, or (as Prue Gill put it in a conversation that was recorded as part of the STELLA project) 'the culture of the school within which that teacher's working' (see Doecke and Gill 2000, p.14). They were concerned that their sensitivity to the complexities of interpreting any account of professional practice should not be discounted in any attempt to judge the portfolios against the standards, as though the professional practice of any teacher can be fully comprehended by locating it within pre-conceived levels of performance.

The 'insiders' were especially critical of the way pre-conceived rubrics describing various levels of performance were used by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) professional judgements. Rather than innocently describing professional practice, such rubrics shape professional judgements in problematical ways, limiting one's capacity to 'see' the full significance of any example of professional practice (cf. Delandshere and Petrosky 1998). This can be illustrated by comparing the NBPTS scoring rubrics for judging the levels of performance of English Language Arts teachers with STELLA statements about the accomplished teaching of writing. Here is an example of the NBPTS rubrics:

The level 4 performance provides clear, consistent, and convincing evidence that the teacher is able to use analysis and assessment of student responses to literature and student writing to support growth as both interpreters of text and as writers …

The level 3 performance provides clear evidence that the teacher is able to use analysis and assessment of student responses to literature and student writing to support growth as both interpreters of text and as writers …

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2005)
These are disembodied images of performance, lacking any indication of the social context or relationships in which the performance occurs. The fact that the statements define levels by using empty modifiers (‘clear’, consistent and convincing’, ‘clear’) not only underlines their character as reified images of performance, but shows how such statements mediate judgement. Rather than recognising the complexities of fully understanding of any example of professional practice, they reduce professional judgement to the level of crudely categorising what you see (the ‘things’ in front of you) in the most crude and unreflective manner. By contrast, here is an excerpt from the STELLA statements about how accomplished teachers of English understand the complexities of teaching writing:

Accomplished teachers value writing as a means of grappling with language and meaning. They have a finely tuned sense of the complexities of the writing process, and they use this knowledge to support their students to write texts for a diverse range of purposes and audiences. They encourage all their students to experiment with and to learn about new genres and forms of communication, including digital and multimedia texts. They know that learning to write is a process of learning how to mean, that each type of writing involves a specific set of conventions, a specific way of representing the world …

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Whereas one text privileges the practice of ‘the teacher’, recasting (or indeed reifying professional practice as a level of ‘performance’, the other text conceptualises accomplishment as a product of the professional community in which English teachers operate.

With respect to all these issues, differences emerged between the English and Mathematics ‘insiders’ who participated in this comparative research project. Amongst other things, the English teachers were especially keen for teachers to have an opportunity to construct an account of their ‘professional journey’ in the form of a narrative, and this did indeed become a component of the portfolios. Their valuing of narrative could be construed as affirming the situated, contextually specific character of a teacher’s professional practice, as distinct from treating professional practice as though it can be located in some kind of neutral realm beyond the socio-cultural contexts in which teachers operate or the values and beliefs they bring to their work. The narratives formed the starting points for ‘interpretive discussions’ (cf. Delandshere and Petrosky 1998) between the English ‘insiders’, enabling them to reflect on both the values of the teachers who had produced the portfolios and the values they were bringing to their reading of these texts.

It is doubtful whether the preparation that the assessors received would be deemed by psychometricians to be sufficiently rigorous. However, the goal of the project was not to achieve psychometric validity (which is, after all, only validity of a certain kind, given a certain set of assumptions about the measurement of complex performances), but to explore the thoughts and feelings of the insiders as they arrived at their professional judgements about the quality of each portfolio. To assume the role of assessors meant taking a somewhat different position vis-à-vis the standards to that which they had occupied hitherto. With the English ‘insiders’, for example, it was noteworthy that when they met to assess the portfolios, they returned to the standards, continually reminding themselves about the content of the domains of professional knowledge and professional practice. They were at this stage making judgements about the quality of the portfolios, both with respect to the evidence presented (i.e. whether sufficient evidence was provided to substantiate the claims being made) and whether the claims were congruent with what STELLA said about ‘accomplished’ teaching. They agonised over whether the ability to assemble a sparkling portfolio necessarily meant that you were a good teacher, moderating their assessments in order to arrive at a fair judgement of the quality of each portfolio, and writing supportive feedback to the teachers who had prepared portfolios. They reflected on the representational status of the portfolios, and whether they had any currency as professional ‘knowledge’ beyond the school communities in which they had been produced.

Both the Mathematics and English assessors were especially mindful of the need to treat the teachers who had submitted portfolios with respect. This, too, is a significant point of difference between the assessment they made and psychometric practices, which are typically enacted outside the context of the professional relationships and conversations in which teachers operate. Although the assessors had not met the teachers who prepared portfolios before reaching a judgement about the quality of their work, they knew that eventually the ‘insiders’ and the ‘outsiders’ would be brought together in order to compare how they had each experienced the assessment process and to reflect on the judgements the assessors had made (this was a
significant part of the research design). As a result, the assessments made by both Mathematics and English assessors convey a sense of professional dialogue that is directed towards learning or professional growth. This is not to say that the assessors pulled their punches, but their criticisms were always combined with an acknowledgment of the courage that the teachers had shown by being prepared to open their professional practice up to scrutiny and the professional qualities that they could identify in the portfolios.

3. Conclusion
Both the ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ who have been participating in PRIME have been engaging in rich forms of inquiry relating to the ways in which professional standards might mediate their learning and practice. If the forum held by the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSRL 2005) at Tullamarine Airport earlier this year is anything to go by, we are about to witness a significant attempt at a national level to implement a standards regime. It seems that the time for flowers to bloom and schools of thought to contend is over (I do not seem to be able to shake off the language and icons of the student protest movement of the 1960s and 70s), and it is now necessary to introduce some order into the proliferation of standards that Australia has recently witnessed at a state and national level – so, at least, I understood remarks made by Fran Hinton in the closing plenary to the NIQTSRL forum.

The PRIME and STELLA research projects provide valuable perspectives on such an initiative and in several respects offer cautionary tales about the need for strategies that will enable teachers to engage with standards in ways that are personally and professionally meaningful to them. The experiences of Louise Piva as she went about preparing her portfolio and the interpretive discussions of the STELLA ‘insiders’ as they engaged with the texts which she and others produced open up dimensions which are ignored when standards are simply turned over into benchmarks for assessing individual performance.

The challenge is to ensure that STELLA remains a vital way for English teachers to review their professional practice, and that it continues to facilitate the kind of inquiry that produced it in the first place.

Note
1 PRIME was funded through a Linkage grant, a type of research grant provided by the Australian Research Council which involves partnerships between universities and industry partners, including in this instance the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, the Mathematics Association of Victoria, and the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

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