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Explaining Ourselves
(To Ourselves):
English Teachers, Professional Identity and Change

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When I wish to communicate the thought that today I saw a barefoot boy in a blue shirt running down the street, I do not see every item separately: the boy, the shirt, its blue color, his running, the absence of shoes. I conceive of all this in one thought, but put it into separate words...


To communicate the thought of the potential of English teaching in the 21st Century is no easy task. And this is not simply because of the difficulty of moving beyond an undifferentiated concept to a string of words that might capture the multi-leveled nature of our work. By writing about English teaching, we are attempting to explain ourselves to ourselves. How can we show that we are offering anything more than a self-interested account of our work? What role can English teachers play vis-à-vis those social and economic changes named by words like 'globalisation', 'managerialism', 'New Times'? Surely we can find more relevant alternatives to 'English', inextricably bound up as it is with 'very tired educational systems ... where curriculum is out of line with new economies, where modes of instruction are rudimentary, post-war, print based chalk and talk or even seventies small group progressive work'? (Luke 2000, pp. 135-6) Surely people who cling to an image of themselves as 'English' teachers are merely showing how bereft they are of ideas that might enable them to step into the future?

Recently a group of teachers and teacher educators engaged in lengthy discussion about such matters as part of a conference of the International Federation for the Teaching of English in Melbourne. The group consisted of people with a diverse range of professional biographies, and they all had rich stories to tell about their experiences of working as English teachers in their respective national settings. A special focus of their deliberations was the experiences of teachers who had only recently joined the profession, when both beginning teachers and more seasoned veterans offered perspectives on the challenges of intergenerational dialogue and professional renewal (cf. Bulfin and Mathew, 2003).

The following paper emerges out of those discussions without pretending to cover the full range of opinions presented. Our aim, instead, has been to try to build on the intellectual work that was done during the conference in order to capture what we ourselves learnt. We shall try to think about our professional learning and commitment in larger terms than they are usually conceived, affirming the promise of English teaching to open up worlds of thought and imagination that defy the forms of social control that appear to be enveloping us post-September 11. To echo the title of the conference of the International Federation for the Teaching of English, we shall argue the capacity of English to discover 'elsewheres of potential' and to provide an alternative to the flawed version of human nature and social relations that currently shapes global politics.

There is no shortage of accounts of English teachers' work by other people, whether by politicians and business representatives who are lamenting declining literacy standards or researchers who are conducting classroom observations. Such accounts are usually given more credence in the wider society than any version English teachers might give themselves. Yet one might also argue that such accounts are what Bakhtin calls 'finalising, secondhand' definitions that reduce English teachers to the 'voiceless objects' of another's gaze (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 58-59). The authors of such accounts typically adopt the pose of omniscient narrators who have somehow gained privileged insights into global changes and the national economy. When they let the characters in their stories speak, it is to express opinions that they have ascribed to them (we need only think of the way researchers sometimes use excerpts from the transcripts of classroom exchanges to make
judgements about a teacher's pedagogy).

Against these 'finalising, secondhand definitions', English teachers might usefully begin to think of themselves as characters in a Dostoyevsky novel. To borrow from Bakhtin, they need to do 'furious battle' with accounts of their work out of 'the mouths of other people', and to affirm their 'unfinalisability, their capacity to outgrow ... and to render untrue any externalising and finalising definition of them' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 59). This means affirming their history as a profession and the culturally situated nature of their professional identities. Rather than clinging to received notions of the profession and canonical ways of categorizing their subject area – e.g. 'writing', 'literature', 'grammar' – they need to embrace the idea that 'English' is inevitably a contestable field and that their professional knowledge and practices as teachers of English are dynamic and responsive to local conditions. Even teacher-owned projects which are designed to affirm the professional knowledge and practice of English teachers, such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) in the United States or the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), cannot be taken as speaking all that needs to be spoken. These attempts to describe the work of English teachers are necessarily provisional and arguably no more than pragmatic and politically savvy responses to government policies.

The standards project

The professional standards formulated by teachers of English in the United States and Australia provide examples of attempts by the professional communities in those countries to give accounts of their work that might compete with other versions of what English teachers do. The work of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the United States was an important response to the conservatism that prevailed in Reagan's America (cf. Petrosky 1998, Petrosky and Delandshere 2000), and it is noteworthy that after a period of consolidation and growth during the Clinton years the National Board is now under threat by the Bush administration (cf. Petrosky 2003). Similarly, the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA) have been a significant attempt by the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) to develop a set of professional standards that might constitute a richer and more complex version of English teachers' work than that implied by standardised literacy testing and other forms of accountability. STELLA provides an alternative to initiatives by systems to define teaching standards, especially managerial forms of accountability for assessing the performance of individual teachers (such as the notion of the 'individual professional' promoted by the Kennett government in Victoria) (see Caldwell and Hayward 1998, cf. Doecke and Gill 2000, p. 7).

This is not to say that such attempts by the profession to formulate standards are exempt from criticism or that teachers are always able to control how others interpret their statements about what accomplished teachers of English 'should know and be able to do' (to borrow the language of standards documents). At the beginning of her book on teacher professionalism, Judyth Sachs wonders whether the 'common currency in everyday language' of words like 'professionals' and 'professionalism' has rendered them 'meaningless' (Sachs 2003, p. 1). Yet words mediate knowledge and human relationships. They construct reality discursively (as Sachs herself acknowledges later in her study – see Sachs 2003, p. 37, p. 41). Shifts in word meanings can be a key indicator of discursive contestation and subtle changes in discursive formations (Foucault, 1991). In a number of educational settings, policy changes have been effected by appealing to teachers' sense of professionalism, and these changes have been accompanied by a shift in the way the word 'professionalism' has been discursively constructed (Locke 2003, 2001). By adopting the word 'standards', English teachers are attempting to reclaim discursively language that is used by others to advance agendas and construct the nature of English teachers' work in ways that are antithetical to any acknowledgement of the richly complex (and contradictory) nature of English teaching.

Any attempt to formulate standards is a struggle over words, a struggle to claim those words for our own purposes, to invest them with our own meaning and sense of the reality of English teaching (cf. Doecke and Gill 2000; see also Maher 2000). There is no evading this, just as we cannot realistically expect a moment to arrive when we will be able to fully claim words like 'professionalism' and 'standards' as our own, as though we can ever completely expunge the meanings that others have ascribed to those words. This is an ongoing struggle and the stakes are high.

STELLA was, in fact, partly conceived as an alternative to the model of professional standards developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (see Doecke and Gill 2000, cf. Brown and
Chadbourne 1998). Although the NBPTS was a critical response to Reagan's educational policies, in many respects its vision of accomplished teaching reflects the ideological world out of which it emerged (see Petrosky 1998, Petrosky and Delandshere 2000, Delandshere and Petrosky 2001). According to Petrosky and Delandshere, there has been 'a frenzy of standards development in the United States' with respect to curriculum, assessment and professional standards for entry into the profession and certification of accomplished teachers (Petrosky and Delandshere 2000), and it seems fair to say that this frenzy has swept up people across the political spectrum. The literature advocating the NBPTS typically reflects a fetish of measurement – it is as though professional standards only have validity if they can be used to measure individual performance (see Ingvarson 1998, Delandshere and Petrosky 1998). Vis-à-vis the crude forms of accountability promoted by right wing think tanks, such as the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's advocacy of standardised literacy testing to show 'value adding' (see Kanstoroom and Finn 1999), it may seem ingenuous and politically naïve to maintain that professional standards are constructs of a provisional nature, or that they are linguistically mediated, the product of extensive conversations between teachers about their professional practice. Yet, if this is the case, the very survival of a research imagination, of a spirit of intellectual inquiry, appears to be in jeopardy.

By contrast, teachers involved in the STELLA project have vigorously resisted any attempt to reduce professional standards to tools for measuring individual performance, preferring to conceive of STELLA as a framework for continuing professional learning and the affirmation of a shared set of values and knowledge by the profession as a whole (see Doecke and Gill 2000, Doecke 2001). Paradoxically, then, the STELLA project provides a critical perspective on professional standards, even as it offers an account of what Australian English teachers believe, know and are able to do (see www.stella.org.au). The STELLA project has provided opportunities for English teachers and teacher educators to explore many questions that have gone begging with the NBPTS, where high stakes assessment of individual professional practice has made it difficult to interrogate key assumptions underpinning subject specific professional standards (if you have been judged to be an 'accomplished' teacher by the NBPTS, you are unlikely to dispute the validity of the standards or the processes by which such a judgement was reached) (cf. Doecke 2001). The challenge remains, however, as to whether the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association can successfully resist attempts by systems to appropriate STELLA for managerial purposes and reword them in the discourse of accountability.

The dangers of allowing our professional culture to be shaped by standards are highlighted by Delandshere and Arens, who have investigated the way portfolios are currently used in pre-service programs in the United States to judge whether students are ready to join the teaching profession. They note the way both teacher educators and their students speak of the need to demonstrate performance 'against' professional standards (language that is also becoming increasingly common in Australia as systems introduce professional standards and protocols for portfolios for beginning teachers). When students are required to assemble portfolio items 'against' certain professional standards, they are being inducted into a culture of compliance rather than engaging in critical inquiry into their own practice (Delandshere and Arens 2003).

A question that has to be asked is whether professional standards can actually provide a framework for authentic professional learning in the way that advocates claim (see Ingvarson 1998; cf. Sachs 2003, p. 48). Petrosky draws out the paradoxes inherent within the process of developing standards by the NBPTS (Petrosky 1998), distinguishing between the way 'insiders' (i.e. the small groups of teachers who have been charged with the responsibility of formulating professional standards) perceive those standards and how those standards are experienced by 'outsiders' (i.e. teachers who were not involved in the focus group discussions that led to their development). Even when professional standards have been developed by a wide network of acknowledged experts (as was the case with both the NBPTS and STELLA), there is no guarantee that they will have any currency amongst the profession as a whole. Petrosky also observes how standards are mostly derived from other standards and therefore reflect received notions of the profession along canonical lines. Their similarity across standards setting projects has more to say about the way they are derived from each other than about consensus within the field. As a-theoretical constructs, without any strong grounding in research on English teaching or effective schooling, they run the risk of promoting a replication of existing structures for thinking about English. Since they do not exist in a space shaped by continuing dialogue between theory, research and teaching, they
threaten to close down critical reflection and discussion about the knowledge and practice of English teachers.

Petrosky’s distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ has prompted research in Australia on how English and Mathematics teachers will receive the standards that have recently been developed by their professional associations. A comparative study, this project interrogates some of the key assumptions behind the development of standards by the English, Mathematics and Science associations (see Doecke 2001). The project involves Australian Mathematics and English teachers preparing portfolios that demonstrate their accomplishments within selected domains of the Mathematics and English Literacy standards developed by their professional associations. By comparing the way these teachers read and interpret these standards, the project aims to test the validity of subject specific standards – do English teachers, specifically, have a different understanding of their professional role because of the nature of their disciplinary field? The project also explores the validity of the standards as a framework for critically reflecting on professional practice.

We are arguing that although there may be strategic value in using the language of standards as part of a wider inquiry into the professional knowledge and practice of English teachers, we need to take care that standards do not displace this inquiry. Many teachers and teacher educators have been goaded into trying to reach a better understanding of the complexities of their professional practice by critically engaging with the NBPTS, STELIA and other examples of professional standards. To accept the strategic value of using the language of standards does not mean that English teachers should cease to interrogate that language or ask why professional knowledge and practice should be conceived in this form.

**Professing to be English teachers**

We now take up a key question that has emerged from the research on professional standards, namely the way in which the professional identities of teachers are crucially bound up with their disciplinary fields.

‘English’ has often been declared to be in a state of ‘crisis’ (a claim that was repeated by Allan Luke in his opening address at the IITE Conference). What should we make of this claim? The productivity of researchers within the field, including the fact that they have reflexively engaged in vigorous critique of the ideology of ‘English’ and ‘Englishness’, appears to suggest that ‘crisis’ may not be the right word to use. Indeed, the contestation, the debate, the self-reflexivity and even the tolerance of disciplinary instability could be construed as healthy (see, e.g., Doyle 1989, Batsleer et al. 1985, Belsey 1980). Surely we do not need to revisit the historical moment of literary theory, or to be reminded of the way that critics like Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said (to stop with those three) have explored the ideologies of a range of textual practices, even as they have themselves engaged in sophisticated forms of textual analysis.

Whether the disciplinary field should continue to be called ‘English’ is certainly worth debating, but there seems little doubt that ‘English’ (even when it is renamed ‘Literary Studies’ or ‘Cultural Studies’) constitutes a field with a set of protocols for conducting research and making knowledge claims, as well as rites of passage for inducting new researchers into an identifiable discourse community (Foucault 1980). John Frow has developed a case for ‘Cultural Studies’, and the critical role of intellectuals who engage in the analysis of ‘economies of value’, precisely along these lines (Frow 1995). A recent issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* (see www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/english/EITPC), which explores the theme of textual diversity on the basis of presentations given at the IITE Conference, richly attests to the way in which the domain of textual practices relevant to the subject is expanding without the whole show breaking down or going off the rails.

Foucault’s arguments about the ‘order of discourse’, and the games of exclusion and inclusion in which members of academic discourse communities engage, suggest that there is no good reason to ascribe stability to any field of inquiry (Foucault 1980). What discipline is not presently confronted by major challenges relating to the ‘knowledge’ that it supposedly embodies? Each discipline is a field of conflicting claims, both internal to the discipline itself and vis-à-vis other fields of inquiry. We need only consider the increasing pressures to conduct research in partnership with industry and the displacement of traditional values of disinterested inquiry and knowledge for knowledge’s sake, not to mention the way that new knowledge – e.g. ICT – has emerged and destabilised traditional boundaries. We could also consider the claims that practitioner researchers make about the validity of their professional knowledge as distinct from more traditional forms of scientific inquiry.

The shifting state of ‘knowledge’ poses interesting questions about the relationship between professional practice and a teacher’s disciplinary field. Grossman
and Shulman argue that ‘the diffuse nature of English as a subject area’ makes it a special case in comparison with Mathematics, History, Geography, and Science (1994, p. 3). They quote Harold Rosen: that English is ‘the least subject-like of subjects, the least susceptible to definition’, contending that ‘the multifaceted and diffuse nature of English as a subject area poses dilemmas for research on teacher knowledge’ (p. 4).

Yet it might be equally well argued that, far from constituting a special case, the relationship between English as a field of inquiry and the professional practice of English teachers should prompt us to review the domains of professional knowledge and practice as they have been enunciated by Shulman. The problem is not simply that Shulman largely focuses on Science teaching when elaborating his categories of professional knowledge, but that he assumes the stability of Science as a field of inquiry, alongside other ‘content’ disciplines, such as History, Geography and Mathematics.

The key challenge for teachers is to transform their academic knowledge into a pedagogical content knowledge that gives their students access to these fields. The professional development of teachers, as Shulman sees it, is essentially a matter of devising a set of teaching strategies that enables this transformation to occur (Shulman 1986). Knowledge is located outside the classroom, in a realm that is apparently free of the ‘crisis of identity and persistent ambiguity’ that afflict subject English (Grossman and Shulman 1994, p. 4).

This traditional conception of the disinterested nature of scientific inquiry provides a foundation for an equally traditional conception of the professional knowledge of teachers as stable and codifiable, a specialist body of knowledge that lifts teachers above the fray, in relation to which they should show ‘integrity’ and ‘fidelity’ (cf. Goodson and Hargreaves 1996, p. 6).

One way of discursively contesting and destabilising Shulman’s model of professional knowledge is by rethinking ‘knowledge’ as a complex set of discursive and non-discursive practices that are inextricably bound up with existing social relations (this is not to say that those practices are simply a function or reflection of those relations). Gordon Wells, for example, critiques the whole edifice of Western culture as a form of cultural hegemony (Wells 1999). This cultural hegemony is not something that, achieved once, remains in force, but needs to be constantly reenacted, reinvented, reaffirmed, and codified as the possession of every culturally literate individual (Hirsch 1987) in the face of continuing attempts to affirm alternative modes of knowledge and experience. Within the field of ‘English’ studies, this struggle has been played out in multiple ways, including vigorous debates over canons and canonicity, and what it means to engage in a ‘close’ reading of any text (cf. Culler 1983, Anderson 1969). As we indicated before, the debates have been lively, less a sign of a ‘crisis’ that imperils the existence of ‘English’ as a field of inquiry (cf. Grossman and Shulman 1994, p. 4), than a necessary struggle to affirm the complexities of language and meaning, language and identity, and to imagine other ways of life and professional identification than those that are currently available to us.

Not that English teachers have committed themselves en masse to this kind of cultural critique – there is plenty of evidence to show that many still see themselves as ‘Preachers of Culture’ (Mathieson 1975), passionate defenders of Shakespeare and other canonical writers. We remain, nonetheless, interested in exploring the implications for their professional practice when English teachers begin to see their role differently, less as custodians of a literary tradition or culture and more as intellectual workers who are committed to ongoing critique of Western cultural hegemony and liberal ideology. The former position is arguably closer to Shulman’s understanding of the way disciplinary knowledge provides a foundation for a teacher’s professional practice, and his view of professional learning as essentially a matter of devising ways to make this knowledge available to students. By contrast, teachers who reconceptualise ‘knowledge’ as always involving claims and counterclaims, as a continuing struggle by various social groups to assert the validity of their ways of experiencing and interpreting the world, are more likely to see themselves as intellectual workers whose goal is to enable their students to join them in this kind of critical inquiry. Indeed, rather than being driven by a conception of the importance of ‘knowledge’, their professional practice might more appropriately be described as being shaped by an overarching ethical commitment (cf. Locke 2003, Doecke and McKnight 2003). They are driven, in short, by an epistemology of ‘praxis’, by the recognition that their goal is not simply ‘to interpret the world but to change it’ (Marx 1973).

In this respect, Shulman’s starting point for developing a differentiated view of professional knowledge (Shulman 1986) is simply wrong. Rather than attempting to define the domains of professional knowledge as they derive from canonical forms of knowledge, it would be better to focus on how teaching provides a context for critical reflection and inquiry. And rather
than attempting to describe what the most 'accomplished' teachers 'should know and be able to do' (i.e. the language of standards statements), we are faced with a more complex task of professing knowledgably, critically and self-reflexively our goals as English teachers. Inevitably, this means interrogating the conditions currently operating in the settings in which we work – the whole range of discursive and non-discursive practices that shape our professional lives, sometimes ensuring that we remain locked into customary habits and traditional ways of thinking. By interrogating those conditions, we acknowledge that the relationship between our knowledge and practice is two-way, and that, in many instances, mandated practices are acting to construct professional knowledge in forms that conflict with our aims and ideals as teachers of English. By foregrounding 'praxis' rather than seeking to affirm our professional status by appealing to traditional forms of 'knowledge', as Shulman does, we recognise the need to grapple with ideologies, schemes for human betterment and social reform. These dimensions of teachers' lives are rendered secondary in Shulman's model of professional knowledge and practice, but they constitute the world of teachers, as they go about negotiating their way through social relationships and networks within and beyond their school communities.

We shall make one final point with respect to the relationship between an English teacher's disciplinary knowledge and ongoing professional practice. Often people talk about debates within 'English' as a field of inquiry as though they have direct bearing on the work of secondary English teachers. We need only think of the way advocates of post-structuralist theory have critiqued the practices of reading and interpretation traditionally associated with English classrooms (Patterson 1992). It is, however, necessary to distinguish between 'English' as an academic field, involving protocols for conducting research and making knowledge claims, and the practices of school English. Common sense might say that the school syllabus should reflect the current state of academic knowledge, that it should not lag behind scientific or intellectual inquiry. But the syllabus or intended curriculum in any setting has its own logic. As Locke (2003) has pointed out, official curriculum documentation is but one 'source' acting to construct English teacher's disciplinary knowledge and practice. The subject-related academic degree, pre-service education and the real world of textual practice and practices around texts are other sources. An individual English teacher's professional knowledge and practice is likely to reflect a rich and contradictory amalgam of all these.

Where does an English teacher's disciplinary knowledge sit within this complex of factors? By resisting mandated practices that undermine their students' attempts to explore the complexities of language and learning, English teachers are not simply pitting their knowledge against other knowledge claims. In his sketch of the domains of teachers' knowledge, Shulman categorises artefacts like textbooks and curriculum guidelines as a particular type of knowledge. Yet for a teacher who is (say) struggling against mandated phonics instruction and standardised literacy testing, such texts present themselves primarily as forms of control, material interventions that radically reshape their relationships with their students, and those interventions need to be confronted as such (cf. Taylor 2003). Through their continuing intellectual inquiry and commitment to their students, English teachers profess themselves to be dedicated intellectual workers who are locked in a material struggle, a confrontation with forces that discursively construct their professional role in undesirable ways.

A new type of English professional

A key emphasis that emerged in the course of discussions at the IFTE Conference was the need for English teachers to confront the conditions of their work. This means understanding how their work is shaped by the specific conditions in which they operate, and how they might in turn make those conditions the subject of their inquiries. By conditions of work we name the physical space of buildings, the movement of bodies and ringing of bells, regulatory mechanisms such as the school timetable and other curricular and managerial structures, including mandated outcomes and the rituals of standardised testing – all things that constitute the workaday lives of teachers. For too long we have treated such things merely as limiting conditions over which teachers can triumph through their professional commitment to their subject area and the students in their care, victims of a kind of philosophical idealism that is incapable of theorising teachers' work as an ongoing form of intellectual inquiry that seeks to interrogate conditions of their work, as a form of 'praxis' (cf. Marx 1973).

Professional standards like the NBPITs and STELLA might be critiqued in these terms. Standards by their very nature are located in an ideal realm that can only exist in a problematical relationship with the specific conditions in which teachers operate. That teachers
might find themselves working in wealthy private schools or underprivileged state schools, that they might be teaching Indigenous students on remote settlements or joining their students in prayer at a fundamentalist Christian school in one of Melbourne’s mortgage belts - by claiming to represent the professional practice of all teachers, standards always run the risk of discounting such differences. Yet you need only step from one of these schools into another to begin asking whether the practices of teachers working within such diverse settings can meaningfully be compared, especially if you want to weigh up the professional ‘accomplishments’ of such teachers.

The mantra of both professional standards and the school improvement literature is that individual teachers make a more significant difference to student outcomes than any other variable in a student’s education (see, e.g., Hill 1995). Although teachers might initially react to such a claim as affirming their role in society, they have reason to be wary of this focus on their individual performance. Why should individual teachers bear the burden of making a difference (Smyth 1992)? How can it be valid to make a teacher’s individual performance a unit of analysis and to discount the context of social relationships which gives that performance its meaning?

Marx exposes the fallacy of positing the individual as existing prior to social and economic structures (Marx 1973, p. 83): elsewhere he and Engels point to the social fact of language as challenging any assumption of the primacy of individual experience (Marx and Engels 1973, p. 51). We could cite any number of other theorists - e.g. Lukács, Gramsci, Althusser, Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Foucault - who have questioned the idea of taking the individual as a starting point for intellectual inquiry and social reform (a significant contemporary example of such an approach is provided by Engeström’s appropriation of Vygotsky’s and Leont’ev’s work to argue that the primary unit of analysis should be ‘activity systems’ - see Engeström et al. 1999). An individual’s performance is always a function of the situation in which he or she is operating, a product of the intersection between larger social structures and his or her autobiography. Professional learning occurs at the intersection between individuals and larger structures or contexts, and can itself more satisfactorily be understood as ‘transindividual’ or ‘distributed’, the product of a network of social relationships or ‘discursive formations’, than the property of individuals.

To foreground the collective nature of teachers’ work means throwing professional standards and other attempts to improve the performance of individual teachers into a socially critical perspective. Whether we are thinking of crude forms of measurement like ‘value adding’ or the relatively sophisticated protocols for portfolio assessment developed by the NBPTS - the question of the legitimacy and relevance of focusing on individual performance goes begging.

The enterprise of developing professional standards to monitor the quality of the performance of individual teachers becomes especially problematic when it is done against the backdrop of declining resources for public education. Rather than addressing the unequal resourcing of schools, or the culturally loaded nature of outcomes-based curriculum and standardised testing, governments propose to raise educational standards by introducing measures to lift the quality of a teacher’s individual performance. After all, research supposedly shows that the key determinant in the success of students is the teacher (Hill 1995). Teachers are encouraged to think that their professional status will be enhanced if they participate in a process leading to their certification as ‘accomplished’ teachers. Other stakeholders in education are encouraged to think that school improvement can be achieved by individual teachers whose performances are deemed to be ‘accomplished’. Meanwhile, the curriculum and timetable stay the same, standardised testing is increasingly used to monitor students’ learning, and the system persists with introducing top-down reforms, forcing teachers to attend professional development sessions in which so-called ‘experts’ extol the virtues of the reforms and implicitly treat the existing pedagogies of teachers as deficient. The provision of space (both mental and physical) for teachers to research their own practice, to develop suitable curriculum and pedagogy for their school communities, and to engage in the joint construction of knowledge is never on the agenda.

However, positing the ‘ensemble of social relations’ rather than the ‘individual’ as a focus for analysis (Marx 1973) is one thing. No doubt there is value in seeing the world differently, and recognising connections that previously remained ‘hidden’, in much the same way that Michael Moore tries to understand gun control and September 11 by situating these phenomena as part of a larger history. The challenge remains as to how to enact or live such understandings when you are positioned as an individual by those very same structures that you are attempting to critique. Even though you understand that your sense of an
autonomous self is discursively constructed, you continue to experience your life as an individual.

Bauman has explored the difficulties of trying to imagine a larger sense of the collective in an 'individualised society', arguing that traditional Marxist concepts of class consciousness no longer have any validity in a world where the class structure has been radically displaced by globalising economic forces and the destruction of nation states (Bauman 2001). He argues (in a way that is congruent with Moore’s satirical commentary on American society) that individuals are boxed in by fear and rendered incapable of operating within the network of relationships that might otherwise be available to them. The requisite conditions for authentic professional learning are always collective, always a function of the network of relations in which individuals operate. Yet, in reporting that learning, individuals always find themselves struggling against structures and practices that ensure their learning remains locked within themselves.

In response to this challenge, we need to find ways to foster organisational structures that would enable English teachers to think and act as members of a larger collective (Locke 2003). This is to tackle old arguments that periodically surface about the role that intellectuals might play in social reform. Post-1968 Australia saw the emergence of the ‘Arena’ thesis, a belief in the possibility of social reform being driven by a radical intelligentsia as distinct from a traditional Marxian view of the revolutionary role of the proletariat. For a range of socio-economic reasons, intellectual workers were deemed to have assumed the position not simply of a revolutionary vanguard that identified with the workers’ interests, but that of a revolutionary class in its own right. Such a scenario might seem to be a far cry from any analysis of the role that teacher organisations might play in post-modern, globalising economies of the kind that Bauman describes (Bauman 2001). Yet it is still important to ask: to what extent can professional associations provide a basis for critical intervention and political action against regressive reforms introduced by governments? If they are not able to offer a basis for such critique, why is this so? What forms of organisation are necessary to enable such a critique to emerge?

What kind of intellectual work do teachers need to perform if they are to develop such a critique? We might argue the strategic value of formulating professional standards like those of the NBPTS or STELLA, and even affirm the knowledge and values articulated by those standards. Yet such projects ultimately remain limited by the paradoxes and ambiguities inherent within them, compromised by the policy environments that have produced them. What other kind of intellectual work might be necessary for teachers to constitute a ‘knowledge class’ (Frow 1995, p. 125) capable of articulating an alternative to current educational policies? Bauman argues that we need to rediscover the capacity to tell stories that have a larger social significance than the privatised tales of postmodern culture, to find ‘more ways of telling a story than are dreamt of in our daily story-telling ... more ways of living than is suggested by each one of the stories we tell and believe in, seeming as it does to be the only one possible’ (Bauman 2001, p. 13). Frow outlines a mode of social analysis involving a concept of ‘relationality’ that forms ‘an instrument for pulling together the strands of social being, thinking it in terms of relationality ... rather than the pure dispersal of social action over a multiplicity of disconnected sites’ (Frow 1995, p. 98).

Such arguments pose a challenge to teachers as intellectual workers to think about their positioning within the social structure and to critically reflect on the possibility of formulating a common set of values and understandings about their role. Unlike projects like the NBPTS or STELLA, these arguments do not allow teachers to side step issues such as the privatisation of schooling, the fact that the advantaging of select private schools means the disadvantaging (or even residualisation) of the state school system (cf. Connell, White, and Johnston 1990), and the ways in which the proliferation of certain standards-based forms of assessment are commodifying education and changing the culture of teaching. The intellectual work we are envisaging obliges teachers to confront the connections between their own situation and that of others, to engage in more complex forms of critical reflection than are usually suggested by the literature on practitioner research, and to interrogate the social role they perform (cf. Kincheloe and McLaren 1994).

**Conclusion**

Our aim in co-authoring this essay has been to reach a better understanding of the issues that collectively we face as a profession without ignoring significant differences between our national settings. The ‘we’ of this essay signifies more than our co-authorship, but is an attempt to map a space that collectively we might occupy vis-à-vis attempts by other educational stakeholders to define our professional identity and role. The
first person plural reflects an attempt to think collectively, to eschew traditional notions of individualism, and to think about our professional learning and commitment in larger terms.

However, we also know that the first person plural can function as a dubious inclusive gesture. We know that our description of teachers as intellectual workers does not apply to everyone—many teachers would not even wish to embrace this account of their work—and we are also mindful of the dangers of foisting unrealistic expectations on teachers whose primary concern is simply to survive from day to day. The problem, indeed, with many socially progressive schemes for educational reform is that their proponents are guilty of the same kind of idealism that we have ascribed to advocates of professional standards. Having explored the implications of reconceptualising our role as intellectual workers, we cannot avoid returning to the conditions of work as teachers actually experience them, which means recognising the radically discrepant views of teachers, their diverse range of experiences, and their varying levels of professional commitment. Any true proposal for educational reform must grapple with the attitudes and values of individual teachers, even as it espouses an ideal of collective action.

By saying this, we may appear to be exercising a degree of reflexivity that is potentially debilitating when it comes to planning and implementing educational reform, and yet, if our intellectual heritage as English teachers means anything, it should mean precisely that: a sensitivity to the conditions—including the networks of relationships and managerial structures—that shape our professional knowledge and practice. Our preoccupation with language, including the paradox that the only tool we have to understand language is language itself, enhances our sensitivity to the way we are situated.

How we position ourselves when we profess our knowledge will be reflected in how we present knowledge to our students and design our teaching. Vygotsky describes the relation between thought and word 'as a living process': 'a word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow' (1962 p. 153). This essay—this string of words embodies this dialectic between language and meaning. To justify our continuing role in the 21st Century involves affirming the centrality of this play between language and meaning in our lives, enabling our students to explore the relationship between thought and word as 'a living process', and thereby to resist the definitions that others would foist upon them.

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