

Answering the Call: Reflections on Professional Learning and English Teaching

Jen Scott Curwood and Alison O'Grady, *The University of Sydney*

Abstract: Research in English involves understanding the complex process of professional learning, which begins in teacher education programs. In this special issue of *English in Australia*, we draw on our experiences as researchers and teacher educators at the University of Sydney. We take a sociocultural and situated perspective in order to explore the purpose of English teacher education, argue for the importance of multi-faceted research into professional learning, and explore future research directions.

English teachers begin their professional learning journey starting as pre-service teachers in an accredited teacher education program, and they continue their learning in both formal and informal ways as graduate teachers. As pre-service teachers navigate and mediate their professional identities, they develop knowledge about their subject and critically reflect on their pedagogy. When they move into the profession, they engage in both school-based professional development as well as out-of-school, self-sponsored, and digitally mediated professional learning.

As researchers and teacher educators, we believe that research in English involves understanding the complex process of professional learning. In this special issue of *English in Australia*, we draw on a sociocultural and situated perspective in order to explore the purpose of English teacher education. We argue for the importance of research into the complex process of professional learning, and we consider future research directions in this area.

Understanding professional learning

A situated perspective on learning highlights how physical, social, and cultural contexts are integral to the learning process (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Consequently, professional learning is situated in specific environments, social in nature, and distributed across people, tools, and resources (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Rather than focusing on how a teacher individually constructs knowledge, this perspective emphasises how the learning process is shaped by social interactions within particular contexts.

It is important to differentiate between *professional development* and *professional learning*. While the former refers to compulsory activities in schools, which are often designed and administered by an outside expert, the latter involves an active, self-directed, iterative, and ongoing process based on a learner's needs (Easton, 2008). As English teacher educators at the University of Sydney, we are fortunate to have over a hundred instructional hours with our pre-service teachers across their English methodology classes. But once they leave our classroom, they must be equipped to engage in ongoing professional learning if they are to effectively meet the diverse needs of their students.

In this respect, professional learning is a *process* rather than a product – one that

takes time, demands commitment, and involves trust (Curwood, 2014). Avalos (2011) argued that it 'requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine where each one stands in terms of convictions and beliefs, and the perusal and enactment of appropriate alternatives for improvement or change' (p. 10). For English teachers, professional learning may involve such diverse and complex activities as engaging in instructional design, investigating educational technology, interpreting and evaluating print-based and multimodal texts, creating effective formative and summative assessment tasks, and integrating social justice principles into the curriculum.

With professional learning, the concepts of activity and community are closely linked. Brown et al. (1989) argue, 'The activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed ... is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor is it neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of what is learned' (p. 32). By engaging in authentic activities that are central to English education, pre-service and in-service teachers alike become part of a community of practice (Jetnikoff, 2011). We believe that while communities of practice can be nurtured within schools and universities, English teachers must be prepared to seek out their own communities, whether they are mediated by online spaces or facilitated through professional organisations. Through engaging in *legitimate peripheral participation*, prospective teachers move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of the community as they engage with diverse identities, perspectives and artefacts (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

We believe that researchers and teacher educators must routinely ask themselves: What opportunities do teachers have to articulate their developing professional identities? How can schools and universities create environments where identities can be expressed, challenged and redefined? What artefacts and experiences can serve as catalysts within communities of practice, from collaboratively analysing syllabus outcomes to reflecting on videos of classroom teaching? How can schools create time and space for self-directed, hands-on professional learning? With these questions in mind, we now turn to English teacher education.

Considering English teacher education

Pre-service English teachers currently studying their craft in Australian universities face unprecedented

challenges. Not only must they develop a deep understanding of language and literacy, embrace culturally relevant pedagogy, and build a professional identity, they must also demonstrate attainment of professional standards and situate their practice within state and national curricula. They are entering into the profession at a time of heightened media scrutiny of the efficacy of teacher education programs and amidst a neoliberal shift in national and global education policies. Moreover, English teachers are 'unavoidably confronted by the question of how our teaching at a local level is situated within a larger social and educational framework' (Doecke & Parr, 2011, p. 15). Consequently, the field of English education can benefit tremendously from research into teacher agency, identity and use of technology.

We believe that teacher education programs must effectively prepare pre-service teachers to engage with the wider issues affecting their students, schools and communities (Hyland & Meacham, 2004). For instance, it is not sufficient for them to be able to identify cinematic techniques and analyse film structure if they cannot draw on social justice principles and argue for the inclusion of documentaries like *Gayby Baby* and books like *Into the River* within the English curriculum. Not only have such award-winning works recently been banned in Australia and New Zealand, they speak to why English teachers must be prepared to exert agency, justify their curriculum choices, and actively confront censorship (Curwood, Horning & Schliesman, 2009). Within our own community of practice, for instance, we seek to cultivate an environment that encourages pre-service teachers to ask questions of themselves and the world around them, critically reflect on their own beliefs and practices, engage with a variety of texts, genres and mediums, and develop a rich understanding of how social justice principles can shape the English curriculum.

Research suggests that it is through dialogue that teachers are able to locate themselves in relation to the school environment, make sense of education reforms, and reflect on their experiences within a 'professional knowledge landscape' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). The ways in which teachers situate themselves within this landscape will shape both their perceived autonomy and their professional identity (Curwood, 2011). Sachs (2005) argued,

Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be',

'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

In this sense, it is the responsibility of teacher education programs to engage pre-service teachers in critical dialogue, facilitate the development of their professional identity, and set them on the path to engaging in life-long professional learning.

The development and engagement of pre-service English teachers requires them to coalesce their learning and engagement with pedagogy and the curriculum. Through participation in communities of practice, online affinity spaces and school-based experiences, pre-service teachers are able to mediate and develop their professional identities. Pre-service English teachers are often avid users of technology as a means to communicate ideas and interests as well as forums for negotiating personal and professional identities (Alsup, 2006). Online affinity spaces provide them with opportunities to test ideas and construct themselves as particular kinds of teachers (Gee, 2011; Lammers, Curwood & Magnifico, 2012). For instance, Twitter and Facebook provide platforms for professional development and creative expression (Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2011; Lu & Curwood, 2015). These opportunities act as an apparatus to the enactment of their role as knowledge producers and agents of change in schools.

The need to embrace change and navigate a futures discourse (Anderson, 2014) means that the pre-service English teachers must be cognisant of the rapidly evolving technological environment. Moreover, they must be equipped to take responsibility for their professional identity and professional learning in order to develop particular cultural models (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) required of contemporary English teachers. Whether they use Browzine app to access the latest journal articles, participate in the weekly #ozengchat Twitter discussion, or attend their local TeachMeet, teachers can take part in readily accessible, affordable and self-directed opportunities for professional learning. Innovative research on agency, identity and technology can push English teacher education in new directions.

Moving forward

This special issue of *English in Australia* poses the provocative question: What is research in English?

Drawing on our experiences as researchers and teacher educators, we have argued that research in English education must focus on the complex process of professional learning. The field of English teacher education can benefit tremendously from multi-method approaches that draw on diverse data sources and studies that engage in methodological innovation (Creswell, 2015; Gerber, Abrams, Curwood & Magnifico, 2017). For example, today's pre-service teachers have new spaces and tools that can support identity development and ideological affirmation, but this area is under researched.

We think that future scholarship needs to explore questions such as:

- What kinds of informal, self-sponsored professional learning opportunities are available to Australian English teachers?
- How can schools and universities recognise and value diverse forms of professional learning?
- What is the role of English teacher education in shaping pre-service teachers' professional identities?
- How can digital technologies encourage pre-service teachers to participate in affinity spaces and communities of practice?
- How can teachers' beliefs and values about capacity of subject English enable their students to become competent citizens of the world?

While we have approached this from our perspective as teacher educators, we believe that senior English teachers and administrators must also reflect on how they will take a research-based and community-oriented approach to support and mentor new teachers.

Within the field of English education, we need to acknowledge the need for a paradigmatic and global shift in teacher education and recognise a discourse of positivity (Stephenson & Ling, 2013) with regard to how pre-service and graduate teachers access professional learning. In doing so, we can seek to engage English teachers as prospective policymakers and leaders in the field. More broadly, it allows us to participate in conversation about the scholarship of teacher education, to consider how to effectively prepare the next generation of English teachers, and to engage in reflective and critical research.

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Jen Scott Curwood is a senior lecturer in English education and media studies at the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on literacy, technology and teacher professional development. Contact Jen at: js.curwood@sydney.edu.au

Alison O'Grady is a teaching-focused lecturer in English education, creativity, pedagogy and practice at the University of Sydney. Her research and areas of interest include English in education, drama pedagogy, creativity and innovation, and early career teachers. Contact Alison at: alison.ogrady@sydney.edu.au