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...“That Which We Are, We Are” ... English Teachers’ Discourses and Their Professional Identities in a Time of Change ®

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Abstract

This paper analyses the patterns found in teachers’ discourses during the implementation of a new HSC 2001 English syllabus in New South Wales and the ways in which these patterns relate to teachers’ professional identities. The teachers involved in the study that is reported had no contact with each other, and were from a selection of locations and school systems from across New South Wales, and yet there is extraordinary consistency found in their ways of thinking and behaving. Although the unique voices of particular individuals are identifiable what is most striking about their discourses is the similarities inherent in them - the metaphors chosen to convey their feelings and attitudes, and the multiplicity of contradictions and ironies in what they said and did. Their collective voice speaks loudly even though their particular contexts for the implementation of new curriculum are markedly different. The teachers’ discourses about their individual self concepts suggest that their professional identities, and what they value in the subject, English, are vitally important components of these constructs. Most teachers viewed their professional identities as being closely aligned with, or even inseparable from, their sense of self. The teachers’ discourses about themselves and their subject in a time of significant curriculum change illuminate the nature of the change process and the ways in which a professional identity is constructed.

Introduction

The interior landscape of teachers’ professional identity contains a number of domains that influence their work. Scholars, in their attempts to define teachers’ knowledge, beliefs and thoughts, distinguish many aspects that guide teachers’ practice and which contribute to their values and attitudes. Various components make up a teacher’s professional identity and it is generally acknowledged that this involves a complex interplay of elements. The contested nature of the subject of English adds to the multiple ways in which teachers within its discipline perceive themselves. The prevailing state of flux in the subject’s identity over the past twenty years has led to its practitioners crafting their own domains within its shifting territory.

How teachers respond to a new syllabus, what they say and do within the challenging landscape of educational reform and curriculum implementation in the contemporary postmodern world attracts considerable research interest from scholars. The introduction in New South Wales, Australia, of a mandatory new Higher School Certificate syllabus in 2000 - for examination in 2001 (see, Board of Studies, 1999) - challenged the prevailing paradigms of the school subject and disturbed the existing beliefs and pedagogies of English practitioners. This period of change provides the historical context for this investigation.

Methodology

The research was developed predominantly within a qualitative framework through semi-structured interviews with fifteen teachers from a range of schools from both the government and non-government systems in metropolitan and non metropolitan locations in New South Wales (see, O’Sullivan, 2005). The participants, who included eight Head Teachers of English and seven teachers of English, were identified using a purposive sampling technique and were chosen from self-selecting respondents to an initial statewide survey. They have a variety of teaching experiences between them.

This study is framed by an understanding that discourses always communicate more than a literal

message (Gee, 1996). Discourses present layered expressions of partial and constructed meaning which convey unique ways of being and acting, and which reveal particular perceptions and realities. The lens used to read the interview texts was informed by the view that “all texts are normative, shaping, and constructing rather than simply reflecting and describing” (Luke, 1995, p.19). In this way, the multiple views and voices produced within the teachers’ discourses and the various positions adopted by the speakers were analysed. The theoretical perspectives of grounded theory, discourse analysis, and curriculum change informed the analysis of the data. The interview texts positioned the individuals in distinctive ways and revealed their various ideas, versions and meanings about themselves as English teachers, their local worlds, and the event of change.

The findings that are presented below are compiled from an analysis of the fifteen teachers’ responses across the interview questions. Clusters of ideas and images are used here to convey the particular features and details that have been drawn from the research data specifically about the teachers’ discourses and descriptions of their identities as English teachers and the nature of their subject.

Findings

Discourses about identity as an English teacher

When asked to describe themselves as English teachers, the participants reveal a strong sense of belief in their own abilities, irrespective of their age or teaching experience. The teachers’ discourses seem to present the established and confident views that they hold of themselves – related to, and derived from, - their past behaviours and thoughts. Their use of personally assertive expressions such as “I am...”, “I have ...”, and “I’ve...” convey the sense that what they are talking about is firmly incorporated into their identity and is a secure part of how they behave and think. The directness and individual assurance of their responses heightens the personal and professional confidence that they communicate about themselves.

Most teachers use personalised statements and images to emphasise what they perceive as their distinctive, defining qualities as English teachers. They speak of the things they enjoy doing in English and some accentuate the specific skills and approaches they attribute as characteristic of their practice. Although a few teachers admit they are feeling less certain about their chosen profession because of the significant upheavals created by the current curriculum changes, they generally display passion for their role as teachers of English and speak confidently about themselves.

In other words, when these teachers are talking about their identities as English teachers at the time of a new syllabus, they tend to define their identity in terms of personal statements that convey their self-appraisals and beliefs; and through a choice of rather surprising images to describe the ways they see themselves.

Personal statements

Some of the teachers volunteered, without embarrassment, a frank evaluation of their teaching abilities and asserted a number of things that generally cast them in a positive light. Their personal statements reveal various aspects of themselves that they seem to have internalised as a part of their teaching identity and which are also part of their own belief and value systems.

Quite a range of perceptions is covered in their self evaluations with some teachers asserting very confident assessments: “a bloody good teacher”; “I’m an English teacher down to my bootstraps”; “I’m capable”; “I find teaching English very easy”; “I am confident”; “I know what I’m talking about”; and “you have to believe in what you are doing ... and I do!”. Others moderate their judgments through their use of qualifiers or hedging, mitigating devices seen in: “I think I’m reasonably well respected by colleagues and students”; “I’m quite good”; “I’m a bit of a rambling teacher”; “some days - damn good...other days - absolutely hopeless” and my view is “in flux”.

Many of the participants appraised their various skills and their particular interests connected to English. The consistent use of first person in their statements creates a strong sense of their socially situated identity - how they position and perceive themselves as teachers of English. Their assessments acknowledge their practical skills, identify their strengths, and classify their state of action. In highlighting aspects of their own practice that they value they point out: “my strength is student motivation”; “I’m a very competent website user”; “I’m very tied to the text”; “I’ve always been

a collector of resources"; "I just love the text"; "I enjoy creating new resources"; and "I'm known for doing weird and wonderful things in English". In contrast, Dorothy and Virginia identify their weaknesses as "I'm hopeless" (visual texts); and "I find poetry difficult".

The teachers named aspects of their personality that they view as an integral part of their teaching disposition. These qualities seem to define them both as teachers and as people and are intrinsically connected. They appear to be incorporated into their philosophy for teaching and in the following examples, there is little separation between the personal and professional: "I don't like to be bored"; "I like kids"; "I'm fairly flexible"; "I like to be able to go with the flow"; "I'm still anti assessment basically"; "I like variety"; "I'm interested in issues"; and "I like to have success".

The teachers' discourses also provide insights about what motivates them in their teaching and again, there is a strong sense of personal ownership and individual assertion. These reasons occur in two main clusters. The first cluster centres on what the teachers say they particularly value for themselves in their subject and their teaching. They espouse aesthetic, moral, practical, and even somewhat selfish reasons. Their use of words such as "love" and "moral" in the following examples represent the deeply felt personal intensity that the subject inspires in some teachers to an extent where it has become a part of their being. This enthusiasm appears as an animating spirit for their professional life: "I love English"; "I see myself as someone creating critical awareness"; "I have a cultural passion"; "setting a moral tone"; "I really enjoy the media side of things"; "the classroom is my 'solace' and where I want to be".

The second cluster centres on their ambitions for their students. There is some evidence of altruism, of a zeal for outcomes beyond academic achievement, and a distinct focus on the wider panorama of life rather than on the more limited canvas of school. What they say lacks specificity in terms of how they actually achieve these expressed goals. There is a desire for something almost intangible in their claims that: "I like them (students) to get the same sorts of things out of literature as I do"; to "add value to students' lives"; "in partnership"; "teaching for life rather than just the HSC"; "to open doors"; and "I'm someone who is able to inspire kids in the classroom".

Their focus is largely on their own passion for their subject – whatever aspect particularly appeals to them - and their ambitions for improving the lives of their students through the sharing of their personal enjoyment and values derived from English.

Personally chosen images

The images the teachers use about their identity contain interesting and unusual comparisons; some are rather unexpected. Their discourses reveal that they chose metaphorical ways of describing themselves that draw on particular characteristics which define the ways individuals act. Their analogies include one collection that is related to the skills of creating, classifying and putting things together: "a facilitator"; "we're masters of creation"; "a bit of a bower bird"; "queen of the magazines"; "a sociologist"; "a collector" and "a mechanic". The other collection involves the skills of persuasion and dramatising: "a salesman"; and someone who "put(s) on a performance". These metaphors represent distinctive styles of behaviour and practice and compare an identity as an English teacher to that of other people or occupations and ways of behaving. In each case, there is a sense of a commodity – material or relational - either being produced or sold. The metaphors position the teachers as perceiving themselves to possess some sort of skill that involves the making or selling of goods. The notion of a 'product' may imply their awareness of some commodification of their role within the educational process. In using these wider comparisons the teachers construct their very personally held concepts into more familiar terms. They seem to move out from an individual frame of reference as a teacher into describing the broader arena of peoples' behaviours and actions within contemporary capitalist society.

As they described their view of their teaching identities, the teachers singled out particular qualities drawn primarily from the affective domain. These emotional states range from "enthusiastic"; "very dynamic"; "very patient"; "a bit radical"; "off-beat"; "fun"; "busy!"; "passionate"; through to Keith's description of himself as "increasingly aging". They express their emotional rather than intellectual conditions and therefore, present themselves as emotional beings. Their perceptions of their work seem to be shaped by their feelings and are directly connected to their inner beings. Most of the words selected appear to convey the teachers' positive feelings of competence and enthusiasm, although for Warren and Neville, their choices indicate that a shift is occurring in their emotional state. Their lexicon reveals less security and stability, seen in "I'm somewhat stressed"; "I was very content"; and "any change is difficult".

The teachers' discourses reveal a very individual way of seeing their role. The emphasis on metaphors related to creation, skill and dramatising, on producing something and on associating feelings with their identities rather than other aspects are somewhat paradoxical when considered together. There appears to be an implied contradiction between their descriptions of their modes of behaving and their expressions of such deep feelings.

Discourses about subject English

In describing their identities as English teachers, the participants also convey their views about their subject. There is no unified definition offered and a number of versions of English are constructed within their discourses. Cara's opinion that "it just seems to be one of those terribly nebulous subjects" is borne out by the many different ways of seeing the subject that are communicated by these teachers. What they value about this "really broad subject" is its personal meanings for them and what it offers students in terms of life skills and experiences. They see English as far more than a subject, it appears as an extension of themselves and as a gift they can give their students. They evoke an almost religious fervour through their emotive language and some blur the boundaries between a sense of self and of the subject. There is a fusion of beliefs, values, and identity, and an emphasis on subjective and rather abstract dimensions.

What subject English means to teachers

A complex mix of features characterises the teachers' shapings of their particular Discourses of English. No one dominant Discourse defines the subject; rather these are personal constructions containing a variety of beliefs and elements. The nature of what they say in their versions of subject English is identifiable primarily through reference to their naming of its philosophical qualities, and in relation to what individuals see as its more significant textual features. Paradoxically, although English is perceived as an intrinsic part of each individual self, it is not the same interpretation for each teacher. Previously there was a cluster of words in the affective domain to describe their identities, here English is presented as a highly individualised creation with many different attributes and accounts to mark out its complex territory.

Some of the teachers value aspects of the subject that are explicitly connected to their personal beliefs, sense of aesthetics and feelings. They value it as being an integral part of their own convictions and life - it is an animating spirit and a powerful force. There is a lack of concrete or objective terms or facts used in their depictions. For some, "English is exciting" and "a humanities subject". It is also "your control over life" and "language is power!" The various emotive responses it generates for them include: "I love English"; "I think it's fun!"; and I have "a very philosophical view".

Quite a few of the teachers indicate specific textual features of English that they regard highly and these generally relate to the subject's literary aspects and a particular type of textual study. What a number of them say privileges English as a literature-based subject, for example: "I like teaching English as a literature course"; literature as "works of art"; "I love poetry"; "I prefer more modern literature"; "I love Shakespeare"; "a certain canon, a certain body of knowledge about literature"; and "academic literary rigour".

Other teachers identify aspects that have special significance for them and include these in their very personal definitions of English: "language in its written, spoken, oral, visual forms"; "a variety of texts"; a subject not "not heavily classical literature and language based"; and being interested in "issues and different readings".

What subject English provides for students

Embedded in their descriptions of English, many of the teachers include their opinions about the ways that the subject assists students. They perceive the subject in active and generally useful terms - as having some impact or consequence for those studying it. These perceptions can be classified according to the various effects the teachers see English creating for their students: either as the development of specific skills or as a preparation for life.

In the first classification, the teachers believe students can acquire particular competencies that range from "basic literacy skills"; the functional use of language; skills and genres used to enhance boys' literacy; critical literacy; to enhanced communication; and improved examination results. Tom, Keith, Denise and Warren particularly, speak of English as a subject that should address social inequities through meeting the needs and abilities of a wide range of students.

Another dimension that English is perceived to provide for students is being a preparation of, and for,

life. Here, the teachers value the subject in terms that are beyond the acquisition of skills and which resonate with more personal and intangible aspirations. Jonathon thinks, "it stretches far deeper than the classroom"; and in Alexa's opinion, "English is not just about the HSC exam". Some teachers believe it has relevance and accessibility for students; it challenges their thinking; it allows rich cultural explorations; and it is "the one subject in which you can speak freely".

Concluding Discussion

Teachers' professional identities in times of change

The teachers' discourses about their individual self concepts suggest that their professional identities, and what they value in their subject, are vitally important components of these constructs. Most teachers viewed these professional elements as being closely aligned with, or even inseparable from, their sense of self, and as occupying a large, significant part of the territory of self. The teachers' frequently expressed uncertainty and stress about the curriculum change contrasts sharply with the powerful way they perceive their professional identities as part of themselves, and the confident ways they characterise English. Their professional identities seemed to remain virtually unscathed by the challenges created by the processes of change set in train by the implementation of a new syllabus.

The significance of the teaching subject discipline for secondary teachers' identities has been acknowledged in the literature (see, for example, Ball, 1985; Clark, 1995; Little, 1995; Goodson & Marsh, 1996). However, there is no general agreement in the research about the exact character of teachers' subject knowledge partly because it is considered that the nature of school subjects themselves is open to debate (Green, 2000). The finding from this study adds a further contribution through its recognition of the primary role of the teacher's subject, in particular English, in the construction of their professional identity and behaviour. The teachers' personal meanings about English lie at the very heart of their professional view of themselves. A number of their deeply held beliefs about the intrinsic qualities of their teaching subject have become features of their practice. This sheds light on their responses to the process of change, especially a change that attempts to challenge their core beliefs and understandings about their subject. Such firm boundaries around a strongly personal pedagogy make it difficult to alter practice.

No unified definition of subject English is offered by these teachers, a finding that supports the current thinking that there are in fact many "Englishes" (see, for example, Morgan, 1997; Pope, 1998) and that a plural form may be a useful tool (Green & Beavis, 1996; Peel, 2000). The prevailing state of flux in the subject's identity over the past twenty years has led to its practitioners crafting their own domains within its shifting territory. The teachers' professional identities have absorbed the way the subject can allow itself to be represented differently to various people. Each teacher in this study has established a personal definition of English and having created this unique signification for themselves - in more cases than not - it remains fixed and appears unlikely to be challenged.

Ball and Lacey (1995) believe that teachers create their own contextual interpretations of a subject based on their own values, knowledge and contexts. This research extends the understanding of how teachers create their versions of English by showing how closely aligned their personal and professional values are. The typical attributes of the subject such as its textual, literary or cultural features and its ability to appeal to the affective domain allow these teachers to draw their own responses and shape their personal meanings about English. They refer to particular literary works they "love" to read, they mention activities such as drama or writing that they enjoy, and they acknowledge some of the specific topics for discussion that they like to share with their students. The teachers' professional identities, then, are constructed through this passionate defining and valuing of their subject.

This study highlights the ways in which English teachers' different views of their subject are firmly entrenched, internalised and incorporated into their distinctive ways of being and acting. It is almost inevitable then that the imposition of major change will collide with this firm core of beliefs and values and it is not surprising that the teachers report feelings of being destabilised. Although hesitations and uncertainties are evident in the teachers' work, the portraits they draw of themselves suggest that any long-term residency in these 'grey' areas of doubt is not likely to occur. Paradoxically, the introduction of a new senior English syllabus does not appear to have affected the teachers' images of themselves or to have particularly shaken their inner self-confidence. In a sense, their conception of themselves

and their subject beliefs are reinforced when challenged rather than being profoundly altered, and so, their adoption of the new remains, for most, fairly shallow. In their attempts to stand firm in the destabilised world in which they work, they impose their own order by keeping hold of their certainties

The teachers' discourses suggested that their professional identities and what they value in their subject are vitally important components of their individual self concepts. Most teachers viewed these professional elements as being closely aligned with, or even inseparable from their sense of self, and as occupying a large, significant part of the territory of self. When the forces of curriculum change challenged them, the teachers held onto what they knew and valued about themselves and their professional identities. The study acknowledged the power of the affective domain and the significance of the particular subject conception in influencing the teachers' actions and these dimensions warrant continued consideration and further exploration. In the future, those who work to promote change should take into account the powerful value systems underpinning the construction of teachers' professional selves and the ways that these shape their responses.

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