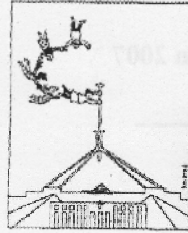


Win a Trip to the National Conference



Critical Capital: Teaching & Learning
AATE & ALEA National Conference 2007
Canberra 8-11 July 2007



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SAETA will sponsor two members to attend the conference in Canberra to be held from July 8-11, 2007. We will pay for your airfare, accommodation and conference registration. The winners will be expected to provide a report of the conference for publication in *Opinion*.

To be eligible to enter the competition you must be an individual member of SAETA. One of these trips will be reserved for a teacher new to the teaching of English, that is someone who has been teaching English for five years or less. Members of SAETA Council cannot enter the competition.

Your Task:

In 500 words or explain what you believe are the critical factors for success in English teaching and learning. Select an appropriate genre for your presentation.

We encourage you to have fun and we welcome creative, entertaining entries which we reserve the right to publish.

Your name and the number of years you have been teaching English should appear on the attached entry form, but to enable the judges to make an objective decision please do not place your name on the entry itself. Our office staff will link your cover sheet to your entry before sending just the entries to the judges.

Entries close: Friday 25 May, 2007

SAETA ABN 46 712 641 424

South Australian English Teachers Association

Entry Form:

Win a trip to the AATE/ALEA National Conference in 2007

Name: _____

Years as an English teacher:

Contact Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Entries close: Friday May 25, 2007

- I am currently an individual member of SAETA.
- If I win the competition I agree to write a report of the Canberra Conference for *Opinion* in 2007.
- I realise that SAETA reserves the right to have entries reproduced and publicised by press, radio, and television, as well as on the SAETA web site.

Signed: _____

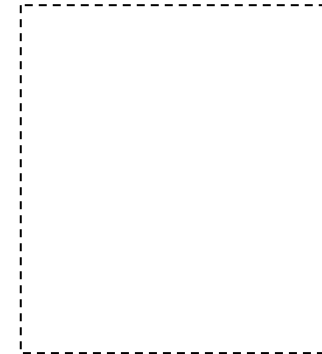


4: Competition Entry

LEARNING DOWN UNDER

Instead of reproducing the tyranny of a decadent educational discourse, one that numbs teachers into its ranks, Garth Boomer advocates that teachers 'teach' to revolutionise the English classroom.

Can you find Boomer's famous phrase on the front of the card?



English through thick and thin...

Raging Against the Neo-liberal Machine

Reflections on the 2007 National AATE & ALEA Conference, Canberra

Andrew Miller

The 'crisis' in education is *not* literacy. The crisis in education is *not* postmodern teachers. The crisis in education is *not* SMS-addicted students. These are cunning rightwing slurs designed to generate public anxiety. The crisis in education is, in fact, the Federal Government—John Howard and his band of not-so-merry rightwing fear-mongers (including shock-jocks and shock-columnists). The crisis in education is when the 'profit motive' and 'ideological crusade' are more important than the *wellbeing* of students and teachers. The crisis in education is when we give up our human face—our commitment to social justice, inclusivity, accessibility, equality, and multiple and critical literacies—for political self-interest and the cold, hard, monetary fact. *THIS IS THE CRISIS.*

The AATE and ALEA National Conference: *Critical Capital: Teaching and Learning* was in fact a 'Defence of teaching' and a 'Defence of teachers.' Schools, it seems, are once again at the forefront of a larger ideological battle: the *culture wars* over 'common sense' and dominant discourse (a war, incidentally, that John Howard claimed victory for not so long ago). Were Garth Boomer alive today he would no doubt have us reading this war *against the grain* and striking back. It is fitting, then, that "The Garth Boomer Address" was staged (or waged) in 'The Great Hall' of Parliament House (did *they* know?), thus symbolising the infiltration of 'leftwing lunatics' into the hallowed chambers on *Newspeak*—where terms like literacy, schooling, student, and teacher are 'commodified' and 'refurbished' to suit neo-liberal agendas (perhaps we could call it *neo-speak*). Ironically, through Michael Apple, we heard some 'plain-speak' outlining the regressive ambitions of the neo-liberal campaign to de-professionalise teaching, de-equip students, and re-legitimise a mono-logical worldview: a worldview that disempowers rather empowers those it *pretends* to help—and we heard this in the very halls dominated by neo-liberal rhetoric. *Go the lunatics!* As a beginning teacher entering an age-old battle, I felt inspired by the (largely) counter-hegemonic platform. Rather than trade in my idealism for an AWA, I was (re)assured that this war was far from over and that there *is* cause for hope in a powerful leftwing backlash. And here's why...

[For the sake of immediacy, reflections on the conference will now be in the present tense.] Michael Apple reminds us in "The Garth Boomer Address: Understanding and Interpreting the Right" that teaching *is* a political activity whether we like it or not. Education can both *affirm* and *empower* or *repress* and *disempower*. Sorting and ordering students, for instance,

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can be an empowering *or* demeaning activity, and the Howard government's educational policies seem more intent on harm than any self-respecting democracy should allow. In "Breaking the Monolingual Habitus, Curriculum's Silent Aim," Joseph Lo Bianco argues that the English language itself is being overrun by 'rationalist' discourses privileging economic ideals like efficiency while deriding humanistic ideals like identity (i.e. neo-liberalism versus humanism). Language and ideology are today so entangled as to seriously affect how we engage the world, thereby constructing a mono-logical and mono-lingual 'Anglosphere' that denies all other forms of knowing and being. Bianco argues that a 'world-minded,' trans-cultural, and critical approach to language-learning can disrupt rationalist discourses and critically awaken students.

In "A Conversation with Michael Apple," Apple notes that schools are classed, gendered, and racialised spaces where students and teachers confront power and privilege daily. We don't, he argues, have so much as a *black—woman—poor* 'problem' as a *white—man—rich* 'problem,' since it is the powerful that perpetuate power and privilege. As teachers we need to develop what Apple calls 'auto-criticism' to recognise our own complicity in hegemony. The discourses surrounding citizenship, empire, and history, for instance, can be used in both retrogressive (pro-hegemonic) and progressive (counter-hegemonic) ways to determine who's in, who's out, and who's 'othered' in the culture wars. The contemporary notion of 'capital' declares that nothing is sacred, so the debate over who has the right to call themselves a 'person' is a serious humanitarian issue.

Apple condemns the Howard government's proposed national curriculum. Although the idea of a 'common' culture or mono-culture can have positive overtones, the reality is that there is *never* a common sense, *never* a common agreement, and such propositions are ultimately mischievous. A progressive form of the 'common' would always be a work-in-progress, an ongoing negotiation that never reaches conclusion; whereas the negative use of 'common' imagines a particular regime that excludes *all-those-that-don't-fit* (aka, John Howard's Australia).

Apple suggests that if we are serious about disrupting 'dominance,' we need to study it, watch it, learn from it, and ultimately challenge it. This may require forming 'strategic hybrid alliances' with other interest groups and compromising certain values while pursuing others (thus echoing Garth Boomer's ideas on 'pragmatic radicalism' and 'compromising without capitulating'). Currently, the right dominates the airways while the left remains gagged. And yet, for Apple, schools (and teachers) must be partly 'victorious' or the neo-liberals wouldn't be attacking them. In this sense, schools are still sites where many issues and struggles are

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'Howard, the necromancer of our national psyche, conjures our fears to frighten us, and then offers to banish them again to soothe us. ... In response, Australians withdrew into a kind of societal trance; they disengaged from the issues that had been preoccupying them; they shut down or, at least, went into retreat. They entered what now looks like the Dreamy Period, and stayed there for the best part of ten years' (Mackay, *Advance Australia Where*, 2007, p. 241).

'worked out' and 'contested.' It is up to us, then, to show students how dominant groups reify power and privilege through discourse and practice. Otherwise, as Garth Boomer wrote in *Metaphors and Meanings* in 1988, students will remain 'more acted upon than acted.'

In "Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century: Developing Powerful Teaching in Schools Organised for Success," Linda Darling-Hammond reminds us that the 'factory model' of education alienates many students by relying on impersonal and divisional methods of transmission teaching. Powerful teaching, conversely, promotes *active* learning through multiple strategies. It uses continuous assessment, ambitious real-life tasks, clear standards and feedback, curriculum differentiation, and classroom collaboration to establish well-functioning learning spaces. Formative assessment is pivotal here. Through ongoing feedback and revision, students become *successful* learners with *positive* academic self-concepts. No student fails: some don't complete, but no-one fails. Powerful teaching generates authentic learning by adopting a 'two-way pedagogy' where 'learning is *talking* and teaching is *listening*.' Assessment drives learning and instruction and is never used to discipline, control, or hurt students. Such a classroom is simultaneously *learner-centred*, *knowledge-centred*, and *assessment-centred*. What's more, it works. Darling-Hammond's success in the U.S. speaks for itself (see: www.schoolredesign.net).

In "A Conversation with Linda Darling-Hammond," Darling-Hammond opposes the idea of students competing for marks since it suggests, by implication, that *teaching doesn't matter*. The 'bell curve' in assessment is nothing more than a hegemonic device guaranteeing failure for some and the impossibility of whole-class success for teachers. And success, ultimately, is what teaching is all about. Darling-Hammond also argues that merit- and performance-pay undermines cooperation and collaboration by pitting teachers against one another. History, she suggests, shows that such initiatives don't work because they de-motivate teachers and make their jobs untenable. She also suggests that basing teacher pay on student scores is *crazy* since it ignores the fact that student populations and student backgrounds differ. Such a system is not only unfair but also counter-productive: it penalises teachers and students in disadvantaged schools. In sum, merit-pay may have the opposite effect on outcomes, efficiency, and morale than corporate think-tanks care to imagine.

In "The Value of Literature and Language in Contemporary Education: Critical Capital, or Superseded Currency?" Paul Brock argues that most of the educational gains of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s have now vanished. The neo-liberals have trivialised teaching and turned English teaching into 'teaching literacy.' Politicians, he suggests, have failed to learn from literacy researchers of the past, something he likens to corporate amnesia. The obsession

Factory Schooling:

'Life as the learning of rules and the doing of homework; the world as a school. As Michel Foucault has shown, however, only by its named function, and not by its organization, structure and assumed values, did the school (in its modern form) differ from the factory, jail, military barracks, poorhouse, corrective institution, workhouse or hospital. All these modern inventions, regardless of their named functions, were also (and perhaps above all) factories of order, industrial plants producing situations in which the rule replaces accident and the norm takes place of spontaneity...' (Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, 1997, p. 129).

with phonics characterises this memory-lapse. English, he suggests, is more than literacy and more than phonics. It involves language, texts, media, literature, reading, decoding, writing, feeling, thinking, and having fun (among other things). Far from being illiterate, this generation of students actually writes more than any other generation – through SMS, email, blogging, YouTube, MySpace, Wikipedia, and so on (literacies that John Howard wouldn't know the first thing about). Consequently, the mainstream media have deliberately misrepresented critical literacy for mischief-making purposes. Brock reminds us that critical literacy is *not new*: it has been around for centuries. Instrumentalism, too, is threatening *non-practical* subjects, causing a rush on skills-based subjects and the demise of critical epistemologies (just what the right wants). In turn, high-stakes testing is generating 'collateral damage' while modernist approaches to literature are killing books. Brock suggests that we need *more* than bare necessities, skills, phonics, and author-centred textual analysis to teach English. We need holistic, eclectic, and polyvalent approaches to literacy and English that draw upon linguistics, functional language, reader-response, form and function, and whole language approaches simultaneously. We need to mix it up, be inventive, and do more than appeal to plot, theme, character, metaphor, and phonics to teach effectively. *And they call us lunatics!*

In "Multiliteracies, Grammatics and the Protean Mind," Mary Macken-Horarik outlines the neo-liberal wish list: to simplify the curriculum, to advance a back-to-basics agenda, and to banish poststructural perspectives from English classrooms. She suggests that a nostalgic, 1950s, *nationalist* agenda is behind this, a point taken up by Brian Cambourne, Jack Waterford, Mike Gaffney, and Mark Howie in "Education and Media Spin." *Canberra Times* journalist and editor, Jack Waterford, suggests that Howard's agenda is simple: to change the dominant discourse in education while silencing educators from challenging his regime. Howard and his spin-doctors use two strategies to achieve this: (1) they research and tap into social anxieties to propagate fear, and (2) they crowd the debate with their own ideas to smother all other voices, issues, and perspectives (a longstanding rightwing strategy). To further this aim they keep a firm grip on all information leaving government departments: everything is filtered and controlled. This way, a mass of *external* voices dominate the airways while those in schools—the *teachers*—are silenced. The challenge, then, is to uncover the *real* debate behind the spin. It is *this* debate we must take to the public – not the rightwing smokescreens. The real aim of the Howard government, then, is to *de-activate* and *de-professionalise* teachers and turn them into workers (i.e. instruments not agents). Waterford notes that John Howard has systematically purged progressives from institutional life to change the culture *back to the one he learnt in 1955 at school*. He hated being accused of racism in the 1980s and has set out to change the 'common sense' to normalise

and legitimise his own ideological values. If people say you're wrong: *change the word 'wrong.'* It's a crusade of ego and nostalgia as much as anything.

Mike Gaffney notes that *The Australian* has wholeheartedly embraced John Howard's crusade. It systematically (and some might say obsessively) bashes teachers while representing students as 'human capital' and economic tools. According to Mark Howie, *The Australian* has a ripple effect on other papers: it sets the debate agenda which moves outward to TV, radio, and other media. In this sense, *The Australian* is a voracious coloniser of debate (a foil) and a voracious generator of 'spin' (a propaganda press). It is both an instrument of the government and the right more generally. Waterford suggests we turn these attacks back on themselves and use the media to do it. If the government tells us we are failing in literacy we need to ask them for the resources to improve it. Further, we need to recruit parents and teachers into the fight. After all, as Waterford points out, the writers for *The Australian* believe they are the ones under attack by leftwing lunatics—not the other way around. They see themselves as the brave crusaders. Gaffney suggests we use our own professional associations and the voice of parents and caregivers (itself a powerful lobby group) to wrest the focus back. We need aggressive public relations strategies and aggressive engagement with government ministers and policies. Mem Fox made it abundantly clear in her welcoming speech that teachers need to write letters to ministers to get their views heard. It's no use lamenting the situation in silence. We need to get active. If they want lunatics, *let's give them lunatics.* Let's give them teachers and parents who are absolutely *mad* about social justice in schooling: mad *active* and mad *angry*.

The reality is that centrally mandated curricula and political agendas *will not* supersede the expertise and know-how of those at the chalk-face. As Garth Boomer suggests:

In order to break these various complicities of tact and illusion, in order to liberate teachers from the tyranny of a decadent discourse, I advocate a revolution in explicitness and honesty which will require, initially, concerted perversity and courage. We need to call education at all levels as *it is*. We need to make opaque many of the presently transparent follies and absurdities that flow through our system. And perhaps the best technique for doing this is to begin swimming against the flow.

(Metaphors and Meanings, 1988, pp. 190-191)

I would sincerely like to thank SAETA for paying for me to attend what I consider an eye-opening and hard-hitting National Conference. And to those who think I may now be unemployable in certain sectors, you might be right.

This text appeared in 2007 in *Opinion: South Australian English Teachers Association (SAETA) Newsletter, 51 (3), 11-13.*

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6: Report Card