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Selective amnesia and the political act of remembering English teaching

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ABSTRACT

In this article the authors explore the phenomenon of ‘selective amnesia’ as it relates to education. We define this as a politically engineered loss of collective memory, both curricular and pedagogic, which has adversely affected what teachers and teacher-educators do. Through an intergenerational dialogue between four secondary English teachers/teacher-educators, we invoke the power of memory to explore alternatives to currently dominant narratives in English teaching. Our starting point is ‘what exactly has been forgotten?’¹ From there we move on to consider the underlying principles and values of the different model of English that emerges from our collective memory, and discuss how this might engage with policy in order to identify new forms and ideas. We propose that, for those involved in English teaching and teacher education in the here and now, memory has both a critical and motivational role to play.

KEYWORDS

Selective amnesia; memory; English teaching; teacher education; auto-ethnographic interrogation

Introduction

In Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel ‘The Buried Giant’ (2016), a haunting fantasy set in the Dark Ages, a mist of forgetfulness has spread over the land of England. Virtually everyone has forgotten their history, their former selves, and lives day to day in a haze of unemotional, deadened relationships. In this context acts of remembering take on a heightened significance, both personally and politically.

As in literary fable so too in real life. At times during 2020 and 2021 remembering has dominated the news, for example, when the British Conservative Government chose to conflate the all-consuming ‘battle’ against the Covid-19 pandemic with the 75th anniversary commemorations of World War II Victory in Europe (VE) day. Unsurprisingly the so-called British ‘blitz spirit’ was invoked as central to this narrative and in preference to memories of the post-war drive for regeneration and social cohesion, which culminated in the landslide election of a left-wing Labour Government and the creation of the Welfare State. More worryingly, ministers have determinedly stoked a ‘culture war’ in response to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the toppling of precisely one commemorative statue in Bristol, UK. This is because BLM has thrown an inconvenient spotlight on the ways in which European societies apply ‘selective amnesia’ to the less savoury aspects of

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the 'imperial legacy' (Younge 2020, 8) of the supposedly 'great men' who are memorialised by statuary. In education too, a similar process of erasure is detectable in the National Curriculum for England; in the subject of History certainly, but also in terms of the texts taught in English. This has led one Black British educationalist to conclude that 'the new curriculum [for English] is a violent political statement that does not invite critical engagement' or even acknowledge the 'erasure of the Black presence and experience in Britain' (Nelson-Addy 2020, 35). At the same time Nelson-Addy demonstrates that 'it hasn't always been like this' (35).

For the authors of this article the act of remembering, if it is to have meaning beyond mere nostalgia, must always sit within a critical framework and address the mist of forgetfulness, to return to Ishiguro's novel, which has afflicted the teaching of English as a core curriculum subject. We are four teacher-educators who have had substantial experience of teaching English in state schools and also educating beginning teachers. It is our collective memories which we draw upon to both illuminate and challenge the current orthodoxies of English teaching. At the same time, we acknowledge Bacalja's (2021) point that English teachers can still find ways to exhibit agency, and 'take advantage of the difference between the intended and enacted curriculum' (86). This is, however, becoming increasingly difficult within highly standardised and regulated systems, and whilst the experiences we discuss are in the context of schooling in England, they find resonance with what is happening in other anglophone countries such as Australia (see Doecke and McClenaghan 2011; Diamond and Bulfin 2021).

Maggie has very recently retired, having lectured for 18 years in higher education, a number of which have been spent as a teacher-educator for secondary English. This part of her career followed 24 years in London comprehensive schools teaching English and drama. Francis is in his early 50s and anticipates working for another decade and a half: he worked as an English teacher in state schools for 25 years before becoming a teacher-educator at a UK university in 2015. Claudia is in her early 40s and has been working as an English teacher and in management positions in South London secondary schools for nearly two decades. Recently she has combined her teaching with educating teachers both in the school and university contexts. Camilla is in her late 30s and balances school teaching with working part-time as a teacher-educator and lecturer at a university alongside co-leading a youth dance, creativity and social justice organisation that she co-founded as part of her PhD. Before taking up their roles as teacher-educators, Francis, Claudia and Camilla were all, at different times, students in the Education Department where Maggie worked.

Both Maggie's and Francis' own teacher education took place before the National Curriculum, school league tables and the Schools' Inspectorate, Ofsted, were introduced in England and Wales. Claudia and Camilla, however, were educated both as school pupils² and university students after these practices were established.

Key questions, which are prompted by the authors' lived experiences as English teachers and teacher-educators, are:

- To what ends has the mist of forgetfulness been engineered by successive governmental policies?
- What constitutes the collective memory of English teachers and what might be gained from exploring this?

- How can memory contribute to a positive account of resistant practices and the pressure for change?

We begin by introducing memory as a method for critically engaging with policy in English. This is followed by an intergenerational dialogue in which we interrogate current orthodoxies and elucidate the values that underpin a different version of English. We conclude by examining how memory work can make a meaningful contribution to a growing movement for change.

Theoretical framework

Our methodological stance, which we describe as auto-ethnographic discursive interrogation, highlights the importance of providing a critical but safe dialogic space in which practice can be examined, theorised and progressively developed. By recalling and analysing what, why and how we taught, and by situating our experiences within the political and educational contexts of the times within which we have worked/are working as teachers and teacher-educators, we seek to challenge ‘the hegemonic control of the dominant voice’ (Freshwater et al. 2010, 505) of policy.

Auto-ethnographic discursive interrogation sits alongside those other methodologies which enable teachers to profitably explore their own teaching practices by using the tools of ethnography: ‘the study of people in naturally occurring settings or “fields” by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities’ (Brewer 2000, 6). Our approach has synergies with that of Tarpey’s (2015) ‘collective memory approach’ (388) to ‘the “Professional Memory” (PM) of English teaching’ (Tarpey 2016, 77). His informants are English teachers who began their careers between 1965 and 1975, a period significant in the development of English teaching practices, both in England and Australia (see Sawyer 2016), but it is Tarpey, and not the teachers, who provides the theoretical framing for their accounts. Also of relevance to our article is Diamond and Bulfin (2021) ‘cultural memory’ (29) study with late career and retired English teachers in Victoria, Australia, which confronts an increasingly technicist definition of teacher professionalism and the set of generic teaching standards upon which it is based.

Our memory work, however, adds a new dimension. In our model the researchers are the researched, and central to our methodology is the shared dialogue between Maggie and Francis, later expanded to include Claudia and Camilla in order to offer a significant generational span. Meetings were carried out face-to-face, remotely and in writing over a number of months, a period that included the pandemic ‘lock-down’. From some initially unstructured conversations focusing on the aforementioned what, why and how we taught, the key questions listed above emerged. These provided the frame for further focused discussions, recorded by each of us in individual notes which were later shared. Again individually, we examined this data-set to identify emerging themes, then met (online) to compare and reach agreement. The final stage was for each of us to exemplify the themes by providing a written account of relevant examples from our teaching experiences.

Whilst there are similarities, our methodology is distinct from ‘collaborative autoethnography’ (Lapadat 2017, 597) in that our autoethnographic accounts were written separately and then analysed, with the methodological focus on individual, as opposed

to collective, experiences. Our attention was not primarily upon ‘team building, professional development or planning processes’ (599), which are often the main emphases of collaborative autoethnography. The aim of our autoethnographic interrogations was to draw out the nuanced commonalities of the authors’ specific practices in order to engage in a wider debate about English teaching, rather than focusing on collective action simply as a way of transforming our own situations.

For the purposes of this paper, we have organised our findings under four headings which correspond to our agreed themes:

- **a spirit of adventure**, recognising the agency of English teachers and their pupils;
- the **collegiality** of English teachers; the coming together of intergenerational, diverse professionals in ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1999);
- vibrant **debate** at all levels in the education system and in the classroom;
- **diversity**: of teaching techniques; in the texts and topics that are taught; of opinions about English teaching.

Whilst these are admittedly broad in nature, we have mined our discussions to provide rich, precise accounts under each heading. Uniquely our approach enables memories of being a pupil, student-teacher, teacher and teacher-educator to interact bi-directionally, and by cross-cutting between them we are able to build a multi-layered memory of English teaching. In particular our dialogue has synthesised the English teacher and teacher-educator perspectives, and via our work both in schools and with beginning teachers, which for three of the four participants is very much ongoing, we propose that acts of remembering can have a direct influence on current pedagogical debates. Throughout we keep the bigger picture in view, to ensure that ‘meaningful narrative patterns’ (Reid 2016, 99) can be discerned from amongst the ‘cumulative mass of information’ (99) that we share, analyse and critique.

Situating the loss of memory within its socio-political context

It was Maggie’s impending retirement and her professional connections to the other authors which prompted all four of us to reflect jointly upon the nature of our knowledge and memories of English teaching. Rather than facilitating a gentle stroll down memory lane, however, our discussions have looked to the future of English teaching, as we highlight what Claudia and Camilla, part of the next generation of English teachers, have taken forward from their teacher education in order to meet changing circumstances.

Maggie and Francis were trained at a time when there was much more attention paid to what became known as the ‘personal growth’ and ‘cultural analysis’ views of English (DES 1989), two of five models identified by the original National Curriculum for English (The Cox Report). Their early careers were spent in classrooms where pupils were encouraged to co-operate in groups, to write personally and expressively, to read books which spoke directly to their lives and to use their experiences to understand the world both within and beyond their immediate experience. The emphasis upon English as a way to help children learn, grow as people and critically engage with literature is much derided for being ‘child-centred’ by politicians such as Nick Gibb, the Schools’ Minister in the Conservative Government.

Gibb, and many of the educationalists who support his views, provide a parodically narrow-minded reading of what ‘child-centred’ approaches are. As Hardcastle (2016) points out, there is nothing *laissez-faire* about ‘starting from what children already know, working with their concerns and interests to a point where . . . it becomes appropriate and necessary to broaden out into the domains of systematic (school) knowledge’ (114). By contrast, Gibb’s (2017a) solution is to maintain a tight focus on ‘teacher-led instruction’. This is because any approach which aims to put the child at the centre of the learning is ‘deeply misguided’ (Gibb 2017b), and he draws on E.D. Hirsch³ to justify his belief that ‘knowledge’ should be taught ‘directly’ to children. The knowledge-rich curriculum in English, as it has come to be known, including Michael Young’s ideas around ‘powerful knowledge’, has been extensively critiqued by Yandell (2017), Doecke (2017), Doecke and Mead (2018), and Doecke, Parr, and Yandell (2021), and so we will not reiterate their arguments here. Nevertheless, from a Hirschian standpoint it is easy to dismiss as out-of-date the version of English which the authors of this article propose, and to position our ~~their~~ concerns as coming from those whose understanding is fixed in a particular time and context, and who now peer down at English departments from the ivory tower of academia. For Claudia and Camilla any such characterisation is particularly inappropriate given their current and very recent experience of English teaching in schools, but Maggie and Francis also challenge Government ministers’ crude depiction of university-based teacher-educators and researchers as the ‘enemies of promise’ (March 2013) and the main reason why ineffective ‘child-led’, ‘progressive’ teaching happens in schools (Gibb 2014). Most serious is the way in which this narrative has led to the systematic side-lining in teacher education policy of university-based programmes, as McIntyre, Youens, and Stevenson (2019) highlight.

To engage with such attempts to re-write past philosophies and practices, it is useful when discussing secondary English teaching to repurpose Williams’ (1977) notion of the interrelationship between dominant, residual and emergent cultures. Dominant educational processes seek to subsume, dilute or repress those residual practices which, although formed in the past, remain active as oppositional alternatives. This often uncomfortable dialectical relationship results in the development of a distinctive emergent culture which seeks ‘new forms or adaptations of form’ (126). Our intention, therefore, is to put our auto-ethnographic, intergenerational dialogue to work, not to advocate a wholesale return to some mythical ‘golden age’, but rather to give due weight to the authors’ expertise as English teachers and teacher-educators when considering what might be emerging.

The purposes and pitfalls of memory work

In recent years the literature about English teaching has grappled with the purposes of invoking ‘personal-professional narratives’ (Diamond and Bulfin 2021, 29) and memories (see the Memory/History special issue of the journal ‘Changing English’ in 2016), when discussing subject knowledge and pedagogy in English. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider why English teaching has arrived at a point where memory appears to be important as both ‘a professional resource and a cultural witness’ (Reid 2016, 109–110). Doecke, Turvey, and Yandell (2016) posit that the work of educators has been diminished by the way in which ‘an historical consciousness no longer shapes our awareness of the

present' (95). If the thinking about English teaching and the language used to describe it have changed, then marking 'the differences between then and now is an important way to put contemporary attitudes and practices into a critical perspective' (95).

A particular concern, however, is to do with generalisation, as examples of past innovative practices would not have been universal, and it is of course true that pedagogy in English varied and was contested. In their brief history of post-WW2 English teaching and the shifting landscapes of schooling in which it was located, Hardcastle and Yandell (2018) acknowledge that pedagogical changes did not 'happen overnight. In the first instance, these were local and piecemeal, relying heavily on the initiative of individual teachers and the ethos of particular schools' (565). Nevertheless, at a time when education was not framed as a competitive marketplace:

English teachers improvised, experimented, consulted, campaigned for reform, scrutinised policy, made mistakes, weathered criticism, but also, crucially, shared their experiences of success and failure in a generous spirit of co-operation (Hardcastle and Yandell 2018, 565).

This sums up how English teachers experienced both the responsibility and exhilaration of acting as curriculum designers not just deliverers, and it is significant that dominant officialdom (Reid 2016) relies on 'ignorance of this professional past' because it is 'intent on "standardising" what counts as good teaching' (102).

The account of Hardcastle and Yandell (2018) ~~account~~ suggests an approach to pedagogic and curriculum development which is animated by a joy for learning and developing one's expertise as an English teacher, a joy which is under threat (Goodwyn 2012; Gibbons 2016, 2019; Jones 2019). The role of memory work, therefore, is to provide a counter-narrative, with the caveat that viewing the past through the ideological prism of the present can never be a fully illuminating process. For example, in the current political climate, with curriculum very tightly constrained by the regulatory mechanisms of assessment, the original version of the National Curriculum for English may, by today's standards, seem to be, if not an entirely benign document, then at least a reasonable attempt at consensus. However, this is to do a disservice to the furore it caused at the time amongst English teachers on the one hand and Cox's⁴ political masters on the other. It is also important to raise that, in an era when dictatorial regulation and surveillance is the perceived norm, the very idea of a national curriculum was once highly contentious. What it is useful to take from this, therefore, is that English teaching has for a long time existed in a very politicised arena and it is this history of struggle which can meaningfully inform the present and project forward to a possible future.

Finally, it is significant that policy-makers in both England and Australia are themselves engaged in deploying a form of false memory syndrome to counter oppositional voices. Thus, in the name of rigour they invoke 'a mythologised past personified by the so-called Western tradition of literature' (Bacalja 2021, 97). Not only does this obfuscate the processes by which particular texts are 'canonised', but it also serves as a barrier to curriculum renewal in this area, a situation of particular concern in the context of recent efforts to decolonise the English curriculum.

The challenge to collective memory

The collective memory of English teaching is 'housed' in its professional institutions and networks. These include local authority teachers' centres and specialist advisory teams, which had a significant presence in English during the 1970s–90s; the bottom-up associations NATE and LATE⁵; Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI); and English departments in schools. It is true to say that all have progressively faced the challenges of marginalisation and worse. Taking the Local Authority (LA) English Advisor as an example, this subject specialist role has largely been abolished as a result of the austerity agenda set in motion by the Conservative-led Coalition Government (2010–15) and an increasingly fragmented school system. LA English advisors worked supportively with English teachers in local schools to provide opportunities for sharing and improving practice, and they organised professional development at LA level. Whilst they have not been replaced, they do have counterparts in Ofsted, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and the examination boards. However, in these organisations advisors often have a very different agenda; their job is not primarily to support and develop but to monitor and judge teachers. Thus, the knowledge base of this new breed of English advisor is founded in the monitoring regimes by which the 'success' of English teachers is formally measured.

Gibbons, a former Chair of NATE, argues in much of his research that successive waves of policy change have not only 'defeated' politically active and 'professional' teachers but also made many English teachers and teacher-educators 'apathetic' (2016, 42), meaning that their voices are not prominent at local or national levels. Instead, teachers who are supportive of Conservative policy initiatives have been championed. Gibb asserts that:

... there are 1,237 active educational blogs in the UK and many of them, I can testify, have directly influenced government policy. Education provides a case-study in the democratising power of new media, providing an entry point for new voices to challenge old orthodoxies (Gibb 2015).

It perhaps comes as no surprise to learn that many of the most highly publicised bloggers promoting a knowledge-based curriculum and direct instruction have been rewarded by important posts in educational policy-making. They have written influential government reports such as the Commission on Assessment without Levels: Final Report (DfE 2015), had a bearing on teacher education policy (DfE 2014; Didau 2018), and been involved in the disbursement of multi-million-pound research grants (Quigley 2019; Education Endowment Foundation 2018). They are part of a collective movement which promotes a 'culturally reactionary curriculum and pedagogy' and have become a 'neo-conservative hegemony' (McIntyre, Youens, and Stevenson 2019, 165). As such they are hardly an example of the democratised blogosphere to which Gibb lays claim.

What is in danger of being forgotten and what should be remembered?

As Ken Jones (2019) demonstrates, many secondary English teachers who were educated in England and Wales up to the early 1990s, emerged from their teacher education with a set of values at odds with the current orthodoxy of teaching, an orthodoxy which has been imposed by successive waves of policy

Historical amnesia is the order of the day. Ofsted's *mea non culpa* for the predominance of test-orientated teaching is accompanied by ungrounded advocacy of new but unargued doxa: 'knowledge-rich curriculum' constructed without acknowledgement of the critiques and challenges which accompany the term; learning defined in terms of memorisation; phonics stipulated as the cornerstone of learning to read. It is only possible to maintain these positions through reliance on a continuing historical amnesia. What, it may be useful to ask when reading Ofsted's new policy positions, has been forgotten here? (Jones 2019, 328)

Ken Jones answers this question when he suggests, by citing Harold Rosen, that what has been lost in English teaching is the focus upon 'the concerns, hopes and fears and daily lives of the pupils' (Rosen as cited in Jones 2019, 329). Our article seeks to address this issue by elucidating some of the values, ideas and strategies that can be recovered in order to meaningfully inform the development of new forms of secondary English practice for the post-pandemic era.

In the analysis that follows we focus on the four previously identified themes, drawing upon the authors' acts of remembering to highlight how specific practices might have a positive impact on the approach to English teaching in schools today. Our key aim is to show that they are not vague concepts which never properly existed in English teaching and therefore have little prospect of ever materialising in the present or future. Rather, these principles were enacted in very specific ways in the past and the act of remembering them has profound value in enabling teachers to shape their pedagogy in the immediacy of the present moment. Furthermore, memory has a political role to play in preparing beginning English teachers for the often harsh realities of current practice by demonstrating to them that other approaches are possible and indeed desirable in terms of the learning that takes place in English classrooms.

A spirit of adventure

Maggie and Francis were educated as English teachers prior to the implementation of the UK's 1988 Education Act. Whilst neither cites this as a particularly 'golden age', their respective courses did impart 'a spirit of adventure', which a number of different elements coalesced to create. The changes that had occurred in response to the comprehensivisation of schools prompted much debate about pedagogical inclusivity and during their teacher education Maggie and Francis learned how to utilise:

- group and project work to make lessons exciting and give pupils a degree of autonomy;
- drama techniques when reading literary and dramatic texts with pupils;
- planning sessions alongside other teachers to ensure that lessons nurtured meaningful, cognitive talk, and reading and writing for pleasure.

Moving forward into their own teaching careers, many of their lessons were characterised by the aforementioned strategies, which were then honed and refined across their years of classroom practice; and when they became heads of English departments, both Maggie and Francis fostered collaborative planning as well as pedagogical and subject-directed discussions within their respective department teams.

Maggie recalls the development opportunities afforded by the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), the new national examination at age 16, particularly as GCSE English and English Literature were, from 1986 to 1994, 100% teacher-assessed coursework examinations. When Maggie was deputy head of English, she recalls the department members, inspired by the vision of their curriculum leader, making some sophisticated innovations:

We introduced a series of lessons called 'Open Study'. Pupils were offered a range of study options, from science fiction, to world literature to teenage fiction, and dedicated funding was made available to compile book boxes for each option. English teacher colleagues in the department worked in pairs to produce the student booklets and materials for each option, which gave an account of the type/genre of literature to be studied, reading lists, approaches, critiques and sample assignment questions.

This memory demonstrates the way in which English teachers were empowered to shape their own curricula. Although successive governments have enforced movement away from such a model, teachers have still found spaces to continue this legacy of exploration, as Camilla's account affirms. In part inspired by the approaches detailed above, she has enjoyed working with her post-16 Literature cohorts over the years to develop a comparative coursework unit exploring the work of poet Carol Ann Duffy and novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, contextualised alongside texts and writers suggested each year by her pupils, ranging from Shakespeare to Nicki Minaj, the rapper and singer-songwriter. As Camilla notes, however, since the introduction of a 100% terminal examination model⁶ at GCSE, these same freedoms no longer easily extend to the English and English Literature curricula at A (advanced) level.

Importantly, 100% coursework syllabi were far from unregulated. Rather, they were supported by a whole infrastructure of guidance and training provided by the examination boards and English advisors. In addition, to ensure the fair application of assessment criteria and provide appropriate checks and balances, English teachers participated annually in a range of moderation events and activities, becoming expert in assessment as a result. It is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when teaching has been disrupted by lock-down, and terminal examinations cannot take place due to social distancing requirements, teachers have again been asked to assess and grade pupils for their GCSEs. However, this is happening without the previously mentioned infrastructure in place, and the decision to give teachers this responsibility has been taken at a very late point in the pupils' courses. What is in danger of being forgotten here, as Maggie and Francis' memories highlight, is that coursework requires a coherent support framework, and the Government's Covid-inspired proposals are therefore most definitely not coursework assessment as we know it could and should be.

In summary, at a time when educational policy itself nurtured a spirit of adventure, by giving teachers a high level of supported autonomy, this spirit could then be passed onto pupils in the form of projects like 'Open Study'. Maggie suggests that, in fostering independence and choice in their reading, the 'Open Study' was popular, not least because pupils were able to explore and find the literature that engaged them. The English teachers responded by developing bespoke resources based on their pupils' interests and also made recommendations to take pupils further in their reading. The

spirit of adventure infused the learning because both teachers and pupils were encouraged to experiment and to search for what really involved them, and this is an approach which, in a different context, Camilla has sought to adapt and develop.

Collegiality

When Claudia became a PGCE English student in the early 2000s, teaching English in a context of school league tables, high stakes inspections and teachers' performance-related pay was already a very different experience. At this time similar changes were happening in other educational jurisdictions (Fuller and Stevenson 2019), but inflected differently according to cultural and historical nuances (see Bacalja 2021). In England the change in the GCSE English assessment to 60% terminal examination meant that an initiative like 'Open Study' would be much more difficult to institute. Nevertheless, Claudia remembers how her tutors brought to her teacher education programme a tenor and approach which was liberating. Even though 'in this world of academia and prestige' she suffered from 'Imposter Syndrome', with her tutors' support she 'began to feel at ease. I remember my first weeks on the programme, engaging in the different activities and learning about the process of learning, I knew that I had arrived'.

As a school pupil Claudia recalls her love of learning but not all her English teachers offered opportunities to draw on her cultural background or encounter texts in which young black women such as herself were represented in rounded, complex ways. She is, however, very clear in her memory of the English lessons that 'truly captivated me', and as an avid reader she does not define representation in narrow terms or deny the place of canonical texts:

The lessons where I learned about segregation, racism and discrimination in Mildred D Taylor's 'Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry'. The lessons where I read about the early nineteenth century and fell into the world of a frugal and isolated weaver, whose life is transformed by the power of love in 'Silas Marner', and lastly the lessons where I had the opportunity to write and create my own stories. Those were the lessons that spoke to me.

The PGCE English programme, with its emphasis on drawing out and sharing the beginning teachers' and their pupils' 'funds of knowledge' (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005), played to these strengths. She particularly recalls teaming up with a fellow student who came from a very traditional literature degree background. This was in contrast to Claudia's own wider reading preferences and her experience of an English degree which contained elements of media and cultural studies. By sharing their reading histories both she and her colleague considerably expanded the reading repertoires that they were then able to take into the classroom, an approach which has gained renewed urgency as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement and the focus in English on decolonising the literature curriculum. The values underpinning the collegial way of working that Claudia enjoyed during her teacher education, which in essence are very similar to those in Maggie's description of teachers developing the 'Open Study' course, continue to inform her practice. This is because, from the outset, collegiality meant that Claudia felt less like an 'Imposter' and more part of an English teachers' community of practice: a group of people practising being teachers together under the supervision of an expert (Wenger 1999). For Claudia this was manifested in group lesson planning activities during which

the PGCE students encountered 'different learning strategies that encouraged a high participation ratio' and worked together on instituting them in their own classroom practices, so that 'my pupils were engaged and shouting out their answers, talking over each other with eagerness and excitement'. This 'learning about the process of learning' contributed to her sense, after only a few weeks on course, of having 'arrived'.

Her account suggests that a functioning community of practice, as described by Wenger (1999), was indeed being developed:

Practice is a shared history of learning that requires some catching up for joining. It is not an object to be handed down from one generation to the next. Practice is an ongoing, social, interactional process, and the introduction of newcomers is merely a version of what practice already is. That members interact, do things together, negotiate new meanings, and learn from each other is already inherent in practice – that is how practice evolves (Wenger 1999, 102).

If practice is not an 'object', but evolves as part of an interactional, intergenerational process, then it is our contention that memory-in-action has an integral role to play. Furthermore, Wenger's description of the negotiation of new meanings and of learning from each other implies that collegiality is at the heart of this process. By mobilising memories of the professional collegiality involved in designing successful, productive English lessons, Maggie has encouraged her students to view 'developing curriculum and pedagogy' as a key 'part of teachers' professional work' (Hardcastle and Yandell 2018, 564), and this in turn foregrounds their agency. Claudia's recollections above highlight the importance of English teachers striving for 'collective understandings about how to improve pedagogy and enhance pupil attainment' (566), and endorse Hardcastle and Yandell's claim that, 'such collaboration enhanced immeasurably teachers' interest in their daily work as well as their sense of professional worth and commitment' (568).

This spirit of creative collaboration, one nurtured initially through the PGCE, is also something Camilla identifies as fundamental to the extra-curricular pedagogies she has co-developed since working in schools:

A key part of my evolving practice has been to co-found a youth dance and creative arts organisation. Although not obviously connected to my work as a classroom English teacher, at least not through an exams-focused lens, it is my collaborations with fellow English teachers and professional artists on extra-curricular projects that has allowed exciting things to blossom. For example, the development of an annual schools' performance event where young poets, spoken word artists and dancers work together to create powerful pieces for performance.

Camilla's 'visceral memory' of learning from and alongside her PGCE tutors and peers, 'the sense of direction and peace' this gave her at the time, is in part what drove her to seek out these more collaborative forms of practice, especially after entering the often individualised world of full-time teaching and its climate of performativity (Ball 2003; Ball and Olmedo 2013).

Debate

For Camilla, who joined the PGCE English course in the late noughties, this spirit of collegiality also laid the groundwork for the debates which animated the students' learning

As the PGCE year progressed, I have vivid memories of time spent with our PGCE tutors and peers . . . listening to impassioned anecdotes about our tutors ripping up SATs⁷ papers ~~apers~~ on national television in protest at the neoliberalisation of language learning, and discussing quietly yet determinedly in groups the best ways to teach difficult texts about homelessness and domestic abuse to Year 9 students, some of whom may well have experienced the same.

Her account suggests how the rich history of debate in English teaching had a positive effect on her own engagement with practice. Learning about her PGCE tutors' role in the anti-SATs campaign of 1993 introduced her to the dialogic nature of English teaching, and she relished the opportunity to take part in its ongoing discourse rather than having to rely, uncritically, on a set of standardised practices. Camilla's words also capture the campaigning zeal that she felt during her PGCE programme, 'the naïve yet not entirely false sense that we were part of a good army – I'm not sure about this metaphor'. This laid the foundation for her view of English teaching as a movement, the driving force of which is the desire to work productively with and do justice to the diversity and richness of young people's experiences, including the creative practices in which they engage outside of the school context.

Also central to the inherited memories of English teaching that Camilla encountered was the importance of oracy. This was one of the great lessons of the English teachers who spearheaded NATE and LATE from the 1950s-1980s (Hardcastle and Yandell 2018, 565). Drawing and building upon the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, English teachers, teacher-educators and researchers showed in their own research and teaching that fostering classroom debate in meaningful, structured and collegiate ways is at the core of effective English teaching (Hardcastle and Yandell 2018; Dixon 2009). Indeed, Maggie and Francis were both part of this vision for English teaching, in the way that they were educated as teachers and then encouraged to implement it in their own teaching. However, Claudia and Camilla were pupils when a growing emphasis upon 'teaching to the test' meant that the commitment to debate, group work and pupil engagement with controversial topics in the English classroom was gradually being eroded. The effects of these changes have inevitably permeated the PGCE programme in the form of some students' scepticism about the value of impassioned debate between teachers, teachers and pupils, and pupils with other pupils. It is the tutors' memories, embodied in the activity of the PGCE sessions, that play an important role in presenting alternative perspectives. This advocacy of debate has lived on in Claudia and Camilla, who both continue to raise controversial issues in their classrooms, and invite discussion in both the teacher education and school contexts.

For example, Claudia, in a highly prescient memory given the very recent Reclaim These Streets demonstrations following the murder of Sarah Everard, describes her teaching for the GCSE English Language Paper 2 examination with a Year 11 class (16 year old boys) in 2018.

I wanted to expose the boys to a variety of non-fiction text types that were diverse and explored concepts such as race and gender, as the racial heritage background of the class was mostly Black African, Black Caribbean and South East Asian, in particular Pakistani.

I chose an article from 'The Guardian' (Mason 2017), which discussed the cyber-bullying and abuse experienced by Diane Abbott MP and wanted the boys to write a response to the article analysing the techniques used in the piece. What transpired was a discussion about

sexism and racism, which then made me stop teaching the text as a medium for exam practice, but using it as a lived experience example to discuss misogyny. They initially struggled and I explained to them that they were being confronted with some very challenging concepts such as privilege and patriarchy, but once they became engaged with the discussion, they wanted to know and read more.

The relevance of the debate, as well as its urgency, reminded Claudia of the limiting nature of a 'teaching to the test' pedagogy. Her four-year relationship with this class enabled her to eschew the focus on surface 'techniques' and instead seek to engage the pupils at a deeper level with the issues in the text. Her final comment suggests both the rigour and potential of such an approach.

For Francis it was his PhD studies in Creative Writing and Education which caused him to re-evaluate his teaching focus. He recalls how his PhD supervisors – colleagues of Maggie – directed him back to vibrant voices from the past in order to inform his action research. He was then teaching part-time in a large comprehensive school in outer London and he found his discussions with his tutors transformative in terms of the practices he was now engaged in. Returning to pedagogical literature written by the likes of Caroline Steedman (1982) and Margaret Meek (1994), he remembered the way he used to teach, and rediscovered the value of group work, circle time and drama activities in his classroom, strategies that he had begun to forget in his drive to get 'better' exam results. Studying for his PhD was, therefore, an act of memory renewal. He remembered what he went into teaching for, some twenty years previously. The mist of forgetfulness began to lift and he became, to his mind, a more effective English teacher, fostering debate amongst his pupils and considering vital pedagogical issues with his teaching colleagues. Ironically, his pupils' examination results also improved.

Diversity

Debate means valuing diversity. While lip-service is often paid to this concept, the evidence is that diversity is being stifled in English classrooms, both in England and Australia, on a number of levels: diversity of texts, of views, of teaching strategies (Hardcastle and Yandell 2018; Diamond and Bulfin 2021). For example, the UK government has recently launched a new 'culture war' which seeks to demonise movements that advocate the diversification of learning approaches (Hicks 2020). Again, there is a political act of remembering to be invoked here, because even though teachers can gain much easier access to diverse texts via online sources, the English curriculum has significantly narrowed (Hardcastle and Yandell 2018). Cuts to English department budgets, an emphasis upon teaching to the test, a focus upon pre-1900 texts, which has arisen because of revisions to the National Curriculum and a change to the GCSE English and Literature specifications, have all led to many pupils reporting a disturbing knock-on effect. A National Literacy Trust Report (2019) indicates that the percentage of children and young people who say they read for pleasure has declined, falling to 52.5%. In 2016 that figure stood at 58.8%. This downward trend suggests that 'reading for pleasure is in long-term decline' (Eyre 2019), whilst the Department for Education's own analysis of the 2018 PISA⁸ findings notes that English pupils have 'more negative attitudes towards reading than pupils across the OECD' (DfE 2018, 57).

Most 15 to 16 year olds (Key Stage 4) in English schools study a preponderance of literature written before 1900, which is, unsurprisingly, authored by dead, white males. This trend is filtering down into Key Stage 3 (11 to 14 year olds) as the pressures of preparing for future high stakes examinations skew the curriculum even at this age. Francis remembers this was not always the case:

My early career as an English teacher was dominated by reading what now would be categorised as ‘young adult novels’ with my Key Stage 3 and 4 classes. I taught in a variety of schools, but the novels read seem to be remarkably similar.

He cites a range of writers including Farrukh Dhondy, Betsy Byars, Beverly Naidoo, Joan Lingard, Nigel Hinton, Mildred D. Taylor and:

... short stories by diverse writers such as Chinua Achebe, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Anita Desai and Amy Tan, some of which were subsequently published in OCR’s anthology ‘Opening Worlds’ (2002).

His experiences are echoed by the findings of The Warwick Evaluation (1994), which concludes that pupils at Key Stage 3 were being introduced to ‘an extensive range of literature’ (124) and text types. Worryingly, Francis’ reading list includes a greater degree of diversity than is currently on offer, as is demonstrated by a recent ‘survey of commonly-taught KS3 class readers’ (Smith 2020, 30).

Whilst Francis remembers the significance of reading diverse texts with his classes, Claudia has powerful memories as a pupil of reading Mildred D. Taylor’s ‘Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry’ (1976) in class. This novel was important to her because it contained black female protagonists and addressed issues about racial injustice that she felt were also very much at play in England. During her teacher education her tutors actively promoted diversity in the literature that should be read with pupils and this gave her the confidence to teach her pupils to read diversely, the complex process of which she explains here:

I have taught English for 18 years, and every time I teach a text I have taught before, it feels like I am stepping into a different narrative each time; where the choices that my pupils and students make are driven and shaped by their experiences prior to and after discovering texts. Their lives change and in turn their responses and reactions to these texts interweave and build on my own experiences of English.

As she makes clear, embracing diversity requires a great deal more than providing pupils with diverse texts – although this is certainly very important. It is also about embracing the diversity of interpretations that pupils might have; not dictating the teacher’s interpretation to them, but rather listening to her pupils’ ideas so that she can, as a teacher, ‘interweave’ their thoughts with her own, thus enriching her own ‘experiences of English’. This involves experimentation; it means taking risks in the classroom, for example, by testing out new and unusual texts, possibly never taught before, and developing new teaching resources.

It is also about addressing the diversity of our own classrooms and the range of views and experiences represented therein. Camilla highlights how her teacher education fostered a spirit of pedagogical experimentation that enabled her to survive her first experiences of teaching:

And then we were out on our placements, hit by the realities of 21st century London schools with their (sometimes) competing goals of academic success and care for their students, and hit equally by the sheer energy and fire of the young minds we were challenged to nurture

within the English classroom, with all of its possibilities. All this was a baptism of fire - for me at least - and all of it we had been prepared for by the PGCE which was at once a cocoon and a laboratory - a place to learn, build strength, find ourselves as teachers, wake up and experiment. But this growing and experimenting never took place alone - it was always as a community if not a family of sorts, one we returned to on Fridays to regroup and remember why we were doing all this. And it is in this that I can't help but think of the PGCE as home.

In her current role as a PGCE tutor, Camilla encourages a similar atmosphere, through a mixture of support, experimentation and discovery, and we would argue that this is still much needed in the context of today's highly pressurised and regulated school system. She clearly recalls her own 'wake-up' moment as a white teacher in the diversity of London classrooms on her PGCE school placements, and emphasises that, for diversity to become a reality, teachers need to have access to the types of learning, support and experimentation spaces she describes above. It is in such spaces that 'the critical thinking bit' of English teaching, as Daly (2004) calls it, takes place, and this is vital in sustaining 'the intellectual creativity of teaching' (196).

Undoubtedly, in terms of policy there has been a movement backwards with regard to diversity. Nevertheless, the memories of Claudia and Camilla demonstrate how the foundations are laid for English teachers to use what agency they have to teach diverse texts, draw on the diversity of pupils' responses and pay more than mere lip service to the complexities of teaching English in diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

Finally we return to our three key questions. It is true that policy-makers continue to engineer a mist of forgetfulness about English teaching, and one challenge that confronts us is in finding ways to convince them that 'memory work' provides a constructive, research-informed and methodologically rigorous engagement with current educational policy. Also, that the intergenerational memories of teachers and teacher-educators have huge value in recovering and nurturing creative, meaningful practices. This process of recovering and re-assimilating productive pedagogies is underpinned by the interaction between the dominant, residual and emergent cultures (Williams 1977) of English teaching. Younger teachers experiment with and adapt the knowledge and concepts that have been honed in different circumstances by their older colleagues, and vice versa. It is this bi-directional process that has the power to generate pedagogies resistant to the prevailing hegemonic practices at play in many schools and colleges. This is ably illustrated by the experiences of Claudia and Camilla who show that it is possible to hold fast to and take forward the practices promoted during their own teacher education, but not as an act of replication. Rather, as forms adapted and adaptable to the needs, interests and contexts of their pupils and workable within the new landscape of school English.

Retrospection, therefore, is more than mere nostalgia; instead it offers a critical lens through which we can view the past and the present in order to look to the future. It also provides a counter-weight to the 'continuing historical amnesia' (Jones 2019, 328) upon which constructions of English currently rely. If beginning teachers are entering the profession with an experience of English classrooms as overwhelmingly examination-orientated places; if they enjoy few memories of having their own 'funds of knowledge' valued, and have only read a narrow range of literature as part of the formal curriculum,

the ability to imagine a different type of English classroom becomes all the more pressing. To recover a spirit of adventure, collegiality, debate and diversity as underpinning principles in English teaching is no simple matter but we have proposed that memory-in-action stands as a significant form of resistant practice in that endeavour.

Although the future remains uncertain, in large part due to the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, it does not rest entirely in the hands of policy-makers. In England the circumstances of the pandemic have lent wider credence to dissenting educational voices, not only because of the huge amount of suffering Covid has wrought for school pupils, university students, teachers and parents, but also as a result of the Government's handling of the educational challenges it has thrown up. Whilst the pandemic has highlighted systemic societal inequalities and the ways in which these are at play in the education system, it has also led to colleagues connecting online, sharing their knowledge and, crucially, prising open the space for professional, teacher-led debates about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, debates in which the authors of this article are all variously involved. In many ways the use of video conferencing has made it easier for all four of the teachers/teacher-educators in this study to regularly remember together and debate, and then to disseminate our discussions across those other forums in which we individually participate.

Furthermore, memory work is vital at this time of instability as governments, not just in England, increasingly find ways to control teacher education curricula by imposing one-size-fits-all programmes, thus marginalising opportunities for reflexivity and debate. Our memories not only make a knowledgeable, intergenerational contribution to a growing oppositional discourse, but also place some significant insights about English teaching on record for the future. As we argue in this article, it is imperative, therefore, for English educators to strenuously champion a wider range of successful forms and practices, and in doing so penetrate the mist of forgetfulness surrounding their subject.

Notes

1. This is similar to the question that Jones (2019, 231) poses in his forensic examination of 'the relationship between neoconservative and neoliberal thinking on the educational right'. His article provides a touchstone for our consideration of the forces that act upon curriculum and pedagogy in English.
2. Throughout we differentiate between pupils (young people taught in schools) and students (student-teachers, also known as beginning teachers) following an initial teacher education programme.
3. See Core Knowledge Foundation. 'E.D. Hirsch Jr.' Accessed May 4 2020. <https://www.coreknowledge.org/about-us/e-d-hirsch-jr/>
4. Professor Brian Cox was the Chair of the Committee of Inquiry which produced the original version of the National Curriculum for English.
5. The National Association for the Teaching of English and the London Association for the Teaching of English.
6. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education in the Conservative-led Coalition Government, introduced 100% terminal examination GCSE syllabi in English and English Literature. These courses commenced in September 2015.
7. Standard Attainment Tests that all pupils were required to sit at the end of Key Stage 3. A boycott of the tests in 1993 by teachers and parents forced a government climb-down. They were re-introduced in modified form in 1995, and despite ongoing criticism, remained in place until 2008.

8. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing and comparing the skills and knowledge of 15 year old students in all participating countries.

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