

Editorial

In the past few months, many of us have been able to identify – more closely than we might ever have anticipated – with the Lady of Shalott. We have been forced to live our lives through screens; venturing outside, communing more directly with the world (and more especially with each other) could prove fatal. Little wonder, then, that we have become more than ‘half-sick of shadows.’

This issue provides space for reflection on the experience of the pandemic. We open with the perspective offered by two of Mimi Marstaller’s high school students in Salt Lake City. Elizabeth Kashindi and Jorisi Nsemgeyezu describe a familiar world made strange. From there, we move across the Atlantic, as Ken Jones considers the ways in which responses to Covid-19 in education reflect, often in grotesquely exaggerated forms, policy trajectories with much longer histories. At the same time, though, there are signs of resistance, as teachers’ responses to the crisis invoke quite different values and priorities.

These themes are taken up in the following two contributions. The first, a collection of shorter pieces written by nine London English teachers, gives a sense of the chaotic conditions that confronted them in the first few weeks of the pandemic; the second, by another London English teacher, Hannah Philp, looks back at what has been lost in lockdown, as she celebrates the productive, embodied sociability of the classroom. John Yandell’s essay develops a strand in Ken Jones’s analysis by looking critically at the version of online learning that has received the enthusiastic backing of powerful voices in (and close to) government.

Though the other contributions to this issue are not so directly related to the moment of Covid-19, all might be construed as speaking to our current condition. Jill Colton’s fine-grained exploration of ways of working with digital literacies in an English classroom emphasises the central significance of the social in the use to which digital technologies are put: the screen here functions as the site of dialogic meaning-making. Fiona Stockdale, likewise, focusing on the learning that is accomplished through debate and other forms of classroom talk, presents a version of pedagogy that is determinedly interactive, irreducibly heteroglossic.

One of the difficulties with the narrower conceptions of knowledge favoured by bureaucrats and politicians is that they fail to take account of the creativity that English teachers tend to regard as constitutive of their subject. Emily Frawley draws on a larger research project to report on Australian teachers’ understandings of the role of creativity in their practice. Across the globe, Lorna Smith considers a century-long history of education policy in England, in which the rise and fall in the attention given to creativity as a dimension of subject English moves in parallel with shifts in how the nation-state is presented in relation to a wider European context.

What kinds of knowledge are involved in English teaching – and how are they acquired? Ian Whitwham reminds us of a vital facet of knowledge that is often marginalised or ignored in the discourse of policy – the rich knowledge of individual students, their lives and identities beyond the classroom, that teachers acquire gradually, through interaction and careful,

sympathetic observation, over long timescales. And, in a review essay, Brenton Doecke takes issue with an account of the history of English literary studies that neglects the meaning-making that happens in classrooms.

Now, where did I put that tapestry I was working on?

John Yandell
Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK