Literary Praxis

A Conversational Inquiry into the Teaching of Literature

Piet-Hein van de Ven
Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

and

Brenton Doecke (Eds.)
Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

Literary Praxis: A Conversational Inquiry into the Teaching of Literature explores the teaching of literature in secondary schools. It does this from the vantage point of educators in a range of settings around the world, as they engage in dialogue with one another in order to capture the nature of their professional commitment, the knowledge they bring to their work as literature teachers, and the challenges of their professional practice as they interact with their students. The core of the book comprises accounts of their day-to-day teaching by Dutch and Australian educators. These teachers do more than capture the immediacy of the here-and-now of their classrooms; they attempt to understand those classrooms relationally, exploring the ways in which their professional practice is mediated by government policies, national literary traditions and existing traditions of curriculum and pedagogy. They thereby enact a form of literary ‘praxis’ that grapples with major ideological issues, most notably the impact of standards-based reforms on their work. Educators from other countries then comment on the cases written by the Dutch and Australian teachers, thus taking the concept of ‘praxis’ to a new level, as part of a comparative inquiry that acknowledges the richly specific character of the cases and resists viewing teaching around the world as though it lends itself unproblematically to the same standards of measurement (as in the fetish made of PISA). They step back from a judgmental stance, and try to understand what it means to teach literature in other educational settings than their own. The essays in this collection show the complexities of literature teaching as a form of professional praxis, exploring the intensely reflexive learning in which teachers engage, as they induct their students into reading literary texts, and reflect on the socio-cultural contexts of their work.
Literary Praxis
PEDAGOGY, EDUCATION AND PRAXIS

Volume 5

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Edited By

Piet-Hein van de Ven
Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Brenton Doecke
Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
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PART 1: COMPARATIVELY SPEAKING
1. OPENING THEIR TEACHING UP TO SCRUTINY

This book arises out of a conversation that began in 1999, when Piet-Hein van de Ven and Brenton Doecke first met in Amsterdam at a conference of the International Association for the Improvement of Mother Tongue Education (IAIMTE). IAIMTE is a network established by Gert Rijlaarsdam (the Netherlands) and Ken Watson (Australia) in a bid to break down the parochialism that inheres within Mother Tongue (or L-1) education, and to provide a forum for conversations (in English) across linguistic boundaries.

Piet-Hein brought to his conversation with Brenton extensive experience as a researcher in another network, namely the International Mother Tongue Education Network (or IMEN), including a set of protocols for classroom observation, a strong commitment to collaborative inquiry between academic researchers and school teachers, and a rigorously theorised approach to comparative research in L-1 or Mother Tongue education (see Herrlitz, Ongstad and van de Ven, 2007). Brenton was, at the time, editor of English in Australia, the journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, and he was heavily engaged in debates about English curriculum and pedagogy vis-à-vis attempts by Australian governments to introduce standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond, 2004, Jones, 2010). The upshot of this conversation between us – a conversation that has been resumed at various times over the intervening years, and in places as diverse as Nijmegen, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Albi and Toronto – was a research project involving Prue Gill and Bella Illesca, two English teachers based in Melbourne, and Ramon Groenendijk and Mies Pols, two Dutch teachers who worked in een school voor voortgezet onderwijs (a secondary school) near Nijmegen. The aim was to conduct a comparative study of the teaching of literature in Australia and Holland, using the protocols for classroom observation and inquiry developed by IMEN. Prue and Bella and Ramon and Mies agreed to develop accounts (or ‘cases’) of teaching literature in their respective settings. Bella acted as Prue’s ‘critical friend’ in developing the Australian case, visiting her school over a number of weeks and engaging in extensive conversations with her before and after each of the lessons she observed. Piet-Hein played a similar role with Ramon and Mies in preparing the Dutch case. When they had written their cases, the Dutch and Australian teachers then read each other’s writing, engaging in conversations that captured their sense of the similarities and differences between their pedagogies as teachers of literature.

Although they were immersed in the immediacy of their day-to-day professional lives, Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies still found time to reflect on their professional
practice as teachers of literature, opening their teaching up to scrutiny by others and interrogating the assumptions behind their pedagogies. They were prepared to inquire into what their activities could mean for their students and what the value of a ‘literary’ education might be within society as a whole, believing that reflection of this kind is an integral part of their role as teachers. Such professional reflection cannot be taken for granted. Recently many educational systems have implemented standards-based reforms and other measures for regulating education, including accountability mechanisms like the Program for International Student Assessment (or PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as well as standardised testing developed at a national level (Australia, for example, has recently witnessed the introduction of the National Assessment Project – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] [see http://www.naplan.edu.au]). A consequence of these reforms for teachers is that their capacities are stretched to the limit as they endeavour to meet the performance benchmarks imposed on them, while trying to maintain an ethical commitment to the welfare of the young people in their care. It is not only the sheer busy-ness that is imposed on teachers that closes off the possibility of critical inquiry, but the way standards-based reforms define a set of educational outcomes (including a certain construction of ‘literacy’) that people are not allowed to question. Standards-based reforms make it increasingly difficult for teachers to interrogate the meaning of what they do, both at the level of their capacity to respond to the needs of individual students (What can I do to help this particular person? Is the curriculum I provide sufficiently inclusive?) and at the level of thinking about the significance of their work as it contributes to the complex process by which a society reproduces itself through its school system (what social good does literature teaching serve?).

The policy language used to describe education increasingly reflects a market mentality, including talk of inputs and outputs, investment and efficiency, of serving ‘clients’ and ‘value-adding’, at the expense of attending to the culturally specific nature of classroom interactions and the personal needs of individual students. Teachers are required to accept pre-determined educational outcomes, such as those enshrined in PISA and other forms of standardised testing, as a given, as though the manner in which these tests construct literacy ability is universally applicable.

By raising questions about what it means to teach literature, Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies have been challenging the ‘new orthodoxy’ of performance appraisal and international comparisons which suppose that everything can be reduced to the same scale of measurement, regardless of specific national contexts (Jones, 2010, p. 14). They were mindful of the value of comparative research, both as a means of recognising the specific character of their educational traditions, and of making their habitual practices and assumptions ‘strange’ by viewing them from the standpoint of others working in a different cultural setting. The conversations and writing in which they have engaged might accordingly be read as exploring the possibility of maintaining a professionally reflexive approach to their own teaching (i.e. a ‘praxis’) at a time when enormous pressures exist to simply do what you are told without questioning.
Each stage of the research project in which these Australian and Dutch teachers have been engaged has involved complex processes of interpretation and representation of their classroom practices. The protocols developed by the International Mother Tongue Education Network (IMEN) for classroom observation presuppose that every observation of teaching and learning implies a particular standpoint or relationship between the observer and the phenomena that he or she is observing. There can be no such thing as an ‘objective’ representation of classrooms, in the sense of an impartial account that transcends the perspective and values of an observer.

For all its claims to ‘objectivity’, so-called scientific research, involving statistical data that have been generated through standardised testing, provides only a partial representation of the relationships that constitute any social setting. Such ‘objectivity’ actually has as its heart an interpretive act, involving an explanation of phenomena that has always-already been constructed as ‘data’ (Anyon, 2008). This recognition that all observations are made from a particular perspective is what gives point to the notion of comparative research as it is conceived by IMEN, and the opportunity that such research provides for participants to view their own knowledge and practice reflexively. In addition to this emphasis on the complexity of interpreting classroom interactions when investigating the situation of mother tongue educators in a range of settings, IMEN affirms the following principles as crucial for comparative research on language education (cf. van de Ven, 2001, Herrlitz & van de Ven, 2007):

– That mother-tongue education is a social construction, and a product of strong national educational traditions and complex policy environments
– That those policy environments are shaped by cultural and ideological factors in tension with globalizing economic and social trends
– That the focus of research should be on the complexities of teachers’ work, and researchers should avoid evaluative judgments about the professional accomplishment of participants.

IMEN is also committed to ensuring that comparative research on classroom teachers should be owned by the teachers who participate in its projects and that it should convey a sense of their voices. Its goal has been to set up a dialogue between researchers and classroom teachers that in turn becomes a basis for an expanding dialogue between researchers of L-1 education across a variety of national settings. At the core of this dialogue are rich accounts of classroom practices that have been jointly constructed by teachers with ‘critical friends’ who observe their classrooms and then engage in discussion and reflection about the interactions they have witnessed. This is what Prue and Bella and Ramon and Mies have achieved by sharing their accounts of their work with one another.

But the impulse behind the particular project that we initiated was never to limit the conversation to Dutch and Australian educators, rich though this conversation has undoubtedly been. Once the Dutch and Australian teachers had written the accounts of their professional practice that constitute Part Two of this book, our aim was to broaden the conversation, and to deepen the reflection by employing
strategies to bring in other viewpoints and perspectives, thus introducing other levels of interpretation. To achieve this aim we made three key editorial decisions:

- We invited Prue, Bella, Ramon and Mies to write cases that were open-ended, prompting readers to reflexively consider their own frames of reference for making sense of each case, and to articulate differences between these examples of literature teaching and literature teaching in their own countries.

- We invited two leading language educators in the Netherlands and Australia to locate these cases within their national policy frameworks, reflecting on how those frameworks mediate the conversations and observations presented in each case. (See the contributions by Theo Witte and Graham Parr in Part Two)

- We invited leading academics and educators from a range of national settings to reflect on the accounts of literature teaching presented by the Dutch and Australian educators, using these accounts to reflect on the teaching of literature in their own local settings. (See the contributions by Terry Locke, Laila Aase, Anthony Petrosky, Mark Howie, Anne Turvey and John Yandell, Irene Pieper, and Mary Kooy in Part Three).

Consistent with IMEN protocols of classroom observation mentioned earlier, all contributors to this book have sought to avoid simple evaluative judgments about the so-called ‘quality’ of the literature teaching or learning in any one particular classroom or curriculum setting. Standards-based judgments, in any single country, assume that one can ignore the rich specificity of local educational settings and simply apply the same evaluative criteria. In such instances, a logic of sameness trivialises and tramples on diversity. What meaning can we ascribe then to PISA’s international comparisons, which must downplay vast cultural, social and linguistic differences between countries and apply the same mechanical criteria in order to compare the educational performance of one country with respect to others (cf. van de Ven 2007)? The rhetoric of international comparisons can seem so reasonable, so ordinary, and yet it is the very ordinariness of teaching and learning that such comparisons are incapable of reflecting. In contrast, the spirit of international comparative inquiry that characterizes this book has sought to understand and appreciate the particularities of the different local settings of literature teaching, particularities that are mediated by language, culture, history, politics, literary texts, etc. By foregrounding such particularities, we aim to facilitate an international conversation that is far richer than that reflected in the fetish that is currently made of PISA, and the kind of panic that is fostered by politicians and media pundits in countries when their educational performance is not deemed to be as high as that of other countries.

The aim of this book has not been to capture examples of ‘exemplary’ or ‘highly accomplished’ teaching in either the Netherlands or Australia, as with the recent focus of standards-based reforms in Western nations. This would be to close down the conversation about language, about literature and about literature teaching that we are attempting to facilitate by conducting this inquiry. The aim might more properly be described as one of investigating the ordinariness of literature teaching as it is enacted from day to day in literature classrooms in different parts of the world. This has entailed making the familiar strange and teasing out assumptions
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that might otherwise remain hidden or taken for granted. Invariably, the different contributors to this volume, writing from their different international settings, provide other levels of interpretation that share the comparative spirit of this project. All in their own ways attempt to understand the examples of literature teaching presented and to use these examples as a prompt to reflect on how teachers teach literature in their own countries.

The contributors to this book are each speculating about whether one can meaningfully speak about literature teaching as essentially the same activity everywhere, apart from some local variations, as though it unproblematically lends itself to comparative evaluations without any regard to the social, cultural and educational traditions that mediate what happens in classrooms around the world. By contrast, the contributors are asking: how can we understand and appreciate what happens in everyday literature classrooms within and across international settings? They are also asking whether we should always value sameness at the expense of cultural diversity. In the face of a globalised policy agenda, and standards-based reforms across the world that ignore the diverse intellectual and professional traditions of literature teaching, not to mention the richly specific nature of teaching as it is enacted in particular communities, we believe such questions well worth asking. The contributors to this volume are attempting, in the spirit of the best comparative research, to learn from each other, asking questions in order to understand, rather than measuring ‘effects’ in order to determine ‘what nation is best’.

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Piet-Hein van de Ven  
Graduate School of Education  
Radboud University  
Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Brenton Doecke  
School of Education  
Faculty of Arts and Education  
Deakin University, Australia
2. A CONVERSATIONAL INQUIRY

Renske: Everything comes back to that, yes, the bad view he has on the world. Of his past, especially. Because in his past, he was used to being less important and stuff. That’s why he is now … well, sad.

Danique: Yes, he thinks the world is bad and that everything goes wrong.

Aike: Like with that friend of his or something, what’s his name … The time they biked home and he would say: nothing wrong? So that kind of shows that he thinks everybody is that way, in a way. Everybody’s boring and … come on, what’s that word?

Danique: A little like self-pity (’zelfmedelijden’)

Aike: Yes, there is no fun really. Or when he describes that party. He’s kind of saying that the party was no fun at all either.

Anne Wil: Mariah Carey being played all the time …

(Finance Classroom, Nijmegen, the Netherlands)

Fiona: [The writing] shows he knows oddities about her … her back door is described as ‘solid’, ‘open’. Could be a metaphor for herself? Vulnerable? She seems like an independent woman, but the man comes in and she breaks down … she becomes a detail in the house as inanimate and lifeless as the doors and the lightshades. Nameless. This is just why he only does it once.”

Liz: He doesn’t need to connect with her.


(Finance Classroom, Melbourne, Australia)

Teachers listen attentively to the classroom conversations in which their students engage. This often involves delicate judgments about whether to stay silent or intervene. Should I move the discussion along by asking a question or making a comment? Or would it be better to allow the conversation to continue, however awkwardly the students might be expressing their insights? Awkward or not, there is value in providing opportunities for young people to find the words they need in order to converse with one another in classroom settings, building on each other’s sentences in an effort to jointly construct meaning and reach understanding.

Talk is an especially vital medium for learning in literature classrooms, where the focus is likely to be on words and what they mean. The snippets of classroom dialogue above, involving students from secondary schools in the Netherlands and
VAN DE VEN AND DOECKE

Australia, each turn on the meaning of particular words. Aike struggles to find the right word to capture her personal impressions of a character’s attitudes and values (‘… come on, what’s that word?’), while Fiona ponders the words the author has chosen to convey a certain tone or mood (‘her back door is described as “solid”, “open”’). These conversations – recorded in classrooms at opposite ends of the world – show young people self-consciously selecting words and weighing up their meaning amongst the range of possible meanings those words might contain. Such reflexivity is arguably a key disposition that interpretive discussions of this type are designed to cultivate in literature students.

As editors of this collection, also living at opposite ends of the world, we read such classroom conversations and appreciate anew how we all live within language. Indeed, we are reminded how our sense of life’s potential (for both good and evil) is enhanced when we (teachers, academics and students) can trace the ways words mediate our exchanges and relationships with one another.

***

This book enacts a ‘conversational inquiry’ in much the same spirit as the interpretive discussions in which these young people are engaging. Our focus is on the teaching of literature in secondary education as it is practised and understood by teachers and academics in a range of settings around the world. We have invited educators in the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England and the United States to reflect on the value of a literary education within their respective cultural settings. We have specifically asked them to write ‘essays’ about literature teaching, using the word ‘essay’ as Montaigne first coined the term, namely as a vehicle by which they could each ‘trial’ or inquire into aspects of their practice as teachers of literature or as teacher educators and researchers who are committed to the value of a literature education (cf. Cohen, 1958/1970). We have been less interested in assembling a collection of papers that reported on research on the teaching of literature within their national settings (though such research constitutes an important reference point for each contribution) than in conducting an inquiry by bringing these voices together. Our aim has been to capture the learning that we have all experienced by participating in the conversation presented in this book. Rather than working toward a set of conclusions, we have tried to stage a conversation that remains open, one which readers will be able to take up in their own local settings in their own conversations with colleagues and other people interested in the teaching of literature.

At the core of the book, as we have indicated in our prefatory remarks, are conversations between literature teachers from Australia and the Netherlands: Prue, Bella, Mies and Ramon. The snippets of classroom talk at the start of this chapter were recorded as part of the classroom-based inquiry originally conducted in both Australia and the Netherlands, when teachers in each of these settings invited critical friends to observe their lessons and then talk with them afterwards about their teaching. The purpose of these visits was to construct richly specific accounts of literature teaching in each country in order to better understand literature
education as a cultural phenomenon. This meant capturing the interpretive practices in which the students engaged (What books do they read? What do they do in class? What kind of writing do they produce in response to the texts they read?). It also meant exploring the teachers’ professional commitment (Why am I a teacher? Why do I believe that it is important to teach literature?), the knowledge they bring to this enterprise (What do I understand by reading? What are the key theoretical resources on which I draw as a teacher of literature?), as well as the challenges these teachers face in their day-to-day interactions with the young people in their classrooms (How can I engage students in reading so-called ‘literary’ texts when there are so many other things competing for their attention?).

You can sense the comparative edge to these classroom investigations. We were not presupposing that literature teaching would mean exactly the same thing in the Netherlands and Australia. A motivation for this research was to enable participating teachers and academics to identify and articulate the philosophical frameworks in which they located their professional practice. When you are speaking to someone new to you, you sometimes find yourself spelling out things in a way that is unnecessary when talking to colleagues who share your everyday world. By becoming conscious of how the ‘same’ thing might be done differently in another part of the world, we – teachers and academics alike – expected to see our everyday practices differently. Bakhtin (whose understanding of ‘dialogism’ has shaped this book in powerful ways) emphasizes that language is not only a resource for jointly constructing meaning, but a sign of the mystery of otherness, of ‘the borderline between oneself and the other’ (Bakhtin, 1981/1987, p. 293). Language pre-exists us, showing how our lives are bound up with those of others. But by acknowledging that others share this world and this life with us, we also recognize that they have their own stories to tell. We need to resist any pretence of imagining that our words can fully comprehend other people, that they see the world as we see it or that we can speak on their behalf. We need to listen attentively to what they have to say and to monitor carefully the way our own values and beliefs frame what we hear. Such dialogue foregrounds the relationship between ‘you’ and ‘I’ – between ‘self’ and ‘other’ – rather than the first person plural (cf. Cavarero, 2000, p. 36).

So although the literature conversations between the young people at the start of this chapter share many features in common, further inquiry will show how these exchanges are mediated by contrasting traditions and structures, revealing differences beyond those perceived commonalities. We feel that is timely to affirm such differences, when education in vastly different countries is being reduced to a standard measure of performance through the so-called PISA tests. This ‘new orthodoxy’, in the form of ‘a globalised policy agenda’ that increasingly holds sway across Europe and other Western countries (Jones, 2010, p. 14), conflicts with national traditions of education and educational reform. Comparative research of the kind enacted in this book takes on a new importance because of the way it resists the assumption that this orthodoxy can be ‘inscribed on blank and receptive national surfaces’ (Jones, 2010, p. 14). By contrast, the conversations presented in this book affirm the specificity of local settings as something that cannot be simply comprehended by the generalising logic of standards-based reforms.
Within a globalising world where English has assumed the status of a lingua franca, it is important to remind ourselves that the conversation between Aike and her peers occurred in Dutch. The very act of translating this exchange into English occurs at ‘the borderline between oneself and the other’, between the worlds of imagination and valuing named respectively by ‘Dutch’ and ‘English’. And even in acknowledging this linguistic difference, we are mindful of how inadequate such labels are to capture the richly specific character of languages as they are spoken and lived in particular locations around the world. At least for six of the contributors to this book, their reflexivity as literary educators is underlined by the fact that they are writing in English, and thus facing the challenge of expressing in a foreign language the nuances of thinking available to them in their own native languages. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that the status of English as a lingua franca does not get around the fact that there are many varieties of English, not simply the dialects that might be heard in so-called English speaking countries, but Dutch English, German English, Norwegian English. In editing the chapters in this book, we have tried to preserve a sense of those contrasting intonations and thus to foreground the complex ways in which language is mediating our inquiry and our exchanges with one another. We want to present contributors as each speaking out of distinct linguistic traditions and cultural settings, even while we strive to ensure that all the chapters are written in accessible English that will bring readers into the conversation being enacted here.

***

A key impulse behind the inquiry out of which this book has emerged has been to present writing in a style that conveys a sense of the complexities of classroom settings and of a literature education. Yet we know that words can never capture those complexities. Derrida taught us this years ago, when he paradoxically declared that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ (Derrida, 1974/76, p. 158). Bella Illesca, an experienced teacher who acted as Prue Gill’s ‘critical friend’, attempts to convey a sense of the day-to-day world of the school where Prue works by casting her writing in the present tense and the first person singular:

As I walk through the school grounds to meet Prue for our first meeting, it comes as no surprise to me that what I see and hear is very much governed by what was conspicuously absent from the government school, where I last worked as an English teacher …

But Bella’s writing is infused with other purposes than simply to capture the here-and-now. She is attempting to foreground her standpoint as an observer, and the values or ideology that she brings to the situation into which she is entering and that shape her thoughts and feelings about what is going on there (cf. Smith, 1987). The fact that her formative experience as a teacher was in a government school means that she finds herself in conflict with the privilege she encounters in an all-girls private school, where parents pay several thousand dollars a year for their daughters to attend. This also mediates her reactions to the way literature is taught
in those settings. She is, at least, acknowledging this possibility, as she reflexively monitors the way her experience and values might frame (MacLachlan and Reid, 1994) her reading of the classroom settings that she is about to observe. Does the elite nature of the surroundings mean that literature itself is nothing more than the preserve of a cultural elite? Or will it be possible to detect signs of an alternative discourse, opening up dimensions of imagination and insight that point beyond the ideological world evoked by the notion of an all-girls private school?

Even an ostensibly matter-of-fact account of entering a school turns out to be shaped by the values of the observer. Not only Bella’s writing, but the writing of all the contributors to this volume, might be said to ‘sparkle’ with ideology (Bakhtin, 1981/1987, p. 277). As Bakhtin remarks, the meaning of any utterance can only be grasped against the background of the views, values and beliefs reflected in the standpoints of other speakers (p. 281). The words which the contributors to this volume use to inquire into the teaching of literature — into what it means to teach literature within the context of their respective cultures, policy settings and traditions of curriculum and pedagogy — do not neutrally reflect the objects or activities they name. This is another way of saying that their essays do not simply describe what ‘is’, but emerge out of their critical engagement with the teaching of literature as a cultural practice, as an enactment of the very conditions of its possibility. And this moment of critical engagement is shaped by all that they bring to it, reflecting a play between past and future. The past is inescapable — their work as educators is powerfully mediated by their biographies as students and teachers of literature, and the traditions of curriculum and pedagogy in which they work. They are, however, confronted by a present that is increasingly shaped by standards-based reforms and other forms of control, such as those embodied in the PISA tests, opening up the prospect of the need to change their practice in order to achieve the educational outcomes that such reforms mandate. The future emerges at the intersection between the traditions in which they have been educated and current policy developments, raising questions about the continuing salience of the education which they have received as educators (Marx, 1969). Their continuing professional learning and experience occur at this intersection, embodying their struggle to negotiate a pathway in the policy environment that is forming around them.

Conceived thus, the challenge of representing professional practice is more than a matter of providing concrete accounts of circumstances within particular classrooms, as though reality could ever be captured by a naturalistic accumulation of detail. Yet there are still good reasons why anyone who is describing the teaching and learning that occur in classrooms would wish to foreground the specific character of the situation being described. To take the trouble to record the details you encounter when you walk into a classroom is paradoxically to acknowledge the impossibility of capturing all the things presented to you. It is to foreground the irreducible nature of the particularities that constitute the here-and-now. This is a life-affirming recognition that reality is always richer than any set of categories that you might bring to an analysis of it.

The impulse behind our own writing and the writing of the contributors to this volume can be differentiated from attempts to capture the ‘truth’ or the ‘reality’ of
the classroom exchanges described. Our aim might, instead, be said to move beyond the here and now, beyond representing what ‘is’, in order to arrive at a mode of analysis that might begin to do justice to the process of literature teaching – to ‘literary praxis’ – within the context of a world that has been swept up by significant social and economic change. This is to acknowledge the way the ‘present’ is always constituted by a play between past and future, between our sense of what might be and our existing practices and beliefs, between what we intend and what (on reflection) we feel that we have actually achieved, between what we feel we ought to do and what government policy tell us to do.

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The contributors to this volume use language as a primary means by which to understand the complexities of teaching literature. This approach contrasts with recent claims about the value of multi-media for depicting classroom settings. The writing team that produced English in Urban Classrooms, for example, argue that ‘a multimodal approach to meaning-making provides a fuller, richer and more accurate sense of what language is, and what it is not … that what constitutes English is not to be found in language alone, but exists in many modes … ‘ (Kress et al., 2005, p. 2). What we quarrel with here is not the notion that (say) visual representations of classrooms can enhance our appreciation of the transactions that occur within them, or that English teaching is a cultural activity that is inextricably embedded in the social relationships and routines enacted in the physical space of classrooms, but that somehow a multimedia approach yields a ‘more accurate sense’ (our italics) of what constitutes English teaching.

This privileging of a multimodal approach betrays a positivist logic that elides the question of how language and other semiotic modes mediate our engagement with the world. The notion that the complexities of classrooms can be captured by employing an array of technology, as though an observer can get closer to the ‘reality’ of classrooms by resorting to audio-visual recording, rather than writing about what he or she encounters, side steps the issue that such representations of classrooms remain interpretive acts that require acknowledging the voices and perspectives of those who may see a classroom differently. This is most obviously the case when it comes to comparing a practitioner’s standpoint with the researcher’s gaze (cf. Kincheloe, 2003, p. 9). In this respect, it is a tell-tale sign that the teachers who participated in the research project on which English in Urban Classrooms is based were the objects of the researchers’ inquiry. The book comprises accounts of classrooms from the point of view of academic observers, repressing the possibility of alternative readings, most notably those of the teachers whose classrooms were being observed (cf. Paré, 2005).

But to foreground the mediating role of language is hardly to privilege it as giving special access to the ‘reality’ of the classroom settings which Prue, Bella, Mies and Ramon encounter every day, in comparison with other semiotic tools at their disposal. Rather, it is to acknowledge their ‘Bestaan’, to use a Dutch word. Unlike the English word ‘Being’ or ‘Existence’, ‘Bestaan’ embraces a notion of the
world in which you find yourself, of the relationships that pre-exist you and extend beyond your immediate apprehension (the same might be said about the German word, ‘Dasein’). And to enter this world is to enter the language that you find there, naming the world and acting upon it. Yet to accept this insight is also to acknowledge that language cannot give you direct access to the world or reveal the world in all its fullness. For to use language is always to engage in an interpretive act that is ‘this-sided’, ‘subjective’ rather than ‘objective’. Not that you should give up on trying to say anything meaningful about the world. As Terry Eagleton remarks, ‘being on the “inside” of a language is a way of being “outside” it as well – ‘it is a way of being among things in the world’. Eagleton thereby captures the complex manner in which language functions as a medium of our experience. His point is that to be ‘inside’ a language is not to be ‘shut off’ from ‘reality’, but to recognise language as an indispensable means by which to access the world around us (Eagleton, 2007, pp. 68–69). Language is more than simply one semiotic mode amongst others, as though you can choose to use language in preference to visual or other means of representation (and vice versa). You do not choose French or German or Dutch as your native tongue. Your language is ‘there’, an inescapable condition for engaging with the world.

We have already noted in the Preface how Bella Illesca, who is herself a former secondary English teacher, and Piet-Hein van de Ven have respectively played the role of critical friends for the Australian and Dutch teachers. As their chapter reveals, Ramon and Mies could also be said to have played the role of critical friends for each other, offering each other insights about their teaching, in addition to the commentary that Piet-Hein provided. The dialogue that Bella and Piet-Hein have each sustained with the teachers whose classrooms they observed – with Prue, Ramon, and Mies – comprises email exchanges before and after the actual observations took place, the transcripts of conversations recorded at the schools, and finally a jointly written account that tries to capture the dynamic of teaching and learning in their classrooms. As part of these exchanges, the teachers and their critical friends also focused on the oral communication and writing in which the students engaged, thus acknowledging yet another layer of meaning-making that is crucial for understanding the nature of the exchanges that occur in classrooms. Our point, however, is that the teachers and their critical friends were reflexively using language at each phase of their work together, grappling with words and their meaning, with conflicting interpretations of their work as teachers of literature. The differences between their standpoints generates a multilayered account of their teaching, a far richer account of literature teaching as a meaning-making activity than that which might be achieved by the kind of multi-modal account we have just been considering.

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Our emphasis on the linguistically mediated nature of this inquiry into the teaching of literature is before all else apparent in the writing in this volume. Both the collaborative writing that the teachers have produced in dialogue with their critical
friends and the essays written by commentators reflect an ongoing inquiry into the teaching of literature. The authors do more than report on research on the teaching of literature. They continue this research through the very act of writing.

By choosing to use the word ‘essay’ to describe the kind of writing presented here, we mean something far removed from the formulaic writing produced by students in Anglophone countries in order to demonstrate pre-existing knowledge or skills (cf. Teese, 2000, Clyne, 2005). Montaigne first used the term to characterise a text that embodies a trial or attempt to tease out the significance of an experience or idea – a significance that can only be realised by writing about it. Rather than simply positing the teaching of literature as an object of analysis, these essays emerge out of the conversations enacted in literature classrooms and fold back into them, part of a continuing dialogue about culture as we enact it from day to day. Any inquiry worthy of the name combines a reflexive awareness that continually returns to the very conditions of ‘knowing’, that continually asks what it means to ‘know’ and ‘experience’ this world.

The theoretical resources on which this study draws conceptualise writing as mediating inquiry. This is to suspend any preconceptions with respect to the content of life or experience. It also means resisting any attempt to prescribe the form that writing should take when it is being used for the purposes of inquiry. Another reason why we have chosen the word ‘essay’ to characterise the writing presented in this volume is that the form of an essay cannot be prescribed in advance, at least when it names the kind of trials or explorations in which Montaigne engages. An essay might combine narrative and argument, as well as providing space for the kind of heteroglossia or combination of voices that Bakhtin valued so highly (Bakhtin, 1981/1987). It is also a form of writing that is not hindered by the borders between academic disciplines.

But clearly we are investing the word ‘essay’ with other meanings than those which Montaigne may have intended when he first used this term, meanings that derive from the work of more recent theorists. If we were to specify the characteristic features of the writing that Prue, Bella, Mies and Ramon have generated in their efforts to understand their professional practice as teachers of literature, we would start by noting its investigative character. But while this matches the spirit of Montaigne’s efforts to explore life as it presented itself to him, their writing is also driven by an impulse that is akin to the writing of people like Frigga Haug or Dorothy Smith. It might be described as writing ‘without guarantees’ (to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall [Hall, 1996, p. 25]). Although Prue, Bella, Mies and Ramon are all committed teachers of literature, their commitment does not preclude the possibility of interrogating the assumptions underpinning their work. Indeed, such a critically reflexive stance might be said to be integral to their professional commitment. They are all prepared to suspend any belief in the value of literature and literature teaching and ‘to begin again at the beginning’ (cf. Benjamin, 1973, p. 97), interrogating the meaning of their work and exposing the assumptions behind their teaching to critical scrutiny. Rather than taking ‘literature’ as a given, they probe the very foundations of their work, in a way which is similar to the kind of inquiry that Frigga Haug performs through her concept of ‘Memory work’
(Errinnerungsarbeit) (Haug, 1990) and – more recently – her attempts to investigate
the nature of education through the writing and reading of autobiographical
narratives that reconstruct experiences of ‘learning’ (Haug, 2003).

An equally salient frame of reference for understanding the writing of both the
teachers and academics who have contributed to this volume is provided by
Dorothy Smith’s notion of ‘writing the social’, expounded in her book with the same
title, as well as other studies (see Smith, 2005, 1999/2004, 1987). Bella Illesca’s
account of walking into the school where Prue Gill works brings to mind Smith’s
arguments about the need to develop a style of writing that registers your entry into
a site, whereby as a sociologist you situate yourself within the social relations you
are about to explore (Smith, 1999/2004, p. 8). There is, as Smith observes ‘no
Archimedean point from which a positionless account can be written’; ‘writing the
social is always from where people are’ (ibid). Crucially – and this applies not only
to Bella’s standpoint but to the approaches of other people who have participated in
this inquiry – Smith understands writing as a process of ‘discovering dimensions of
the social that come into view’, as we progressively ‘discover the lineaments of
social relations in which our own lives are embedded’ (ibid). There is, as Smith observes
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this inquiry – Smith understands writing as a process of ‘discovering dimensions of
the social that come into view’, as we progressively ‘discover the lineaments of
social relations in which our own lives are embedded’ (ibid). Although Mies,
Ramon, and Prue all begin with the institutional settings in which they work, their
dialogue with their critical friends takes them beyond the immediacy of the day-to-
day, enabling them to acknowledge the way traditions of curriculum and pedagogy,
mandated policies, as well as the social relationships in which their pupils participate,
shape what they do in their classrooms. They have begun, in short, to think
relationally, to understand how the here-and-now presented to them is the product
of a wider network of relationships, not all of them visible to an observer. The
same can be said about the essays written by the other contributors to this book. All
have been engaged in a process of discovery that has enabled them to view their existing
knowledge and work reflexively. Smith’s understanding of ‘writing the social’
again seems pertinent.

Writing the social profits from the dialogue between what we mean to say
and what we discover we have said, and, of course, the work of rewriting to
embrace what we find we have said that is beyond or other than our
intentions. (Smith, 1999/2004, p. 9)

Dorothy Smith’s words serve to capture the joint inquiry that is enacted in this
volume, including the iterative process that we have experienced as we have sought
to refine our writing through our dialogue with ourselves and with each other. Each
draft of the essays in this book has been a process of ‘discovering’ what we have
said and then seeking to build on the insights that have become available to us.

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Rather than supposing that representing classroom practice involves aspiring to
some kind of ‘objectivity’ that captures what ‘is’, we see ourselves as performing
an alternative task: of constructing accounts of teaching that explore the differences between our intentions as teachers and researchers and what we actually achieve, between our individual aims and the meaning of the whole process as we collectively enact it.

As Douglas Barnes shows with respect to lesson planning and curriculum development, the difference between our intentions and our actions does not necessarily signal a failure on the part of teachers, but the discovery of richer dimensions of language and learning than they may have originally envisaged (Barnes, 1976/1992, p. 14). The difference between intention and enactment opens up a space for imagination and play, for thinking otherwise, for entertaining possibilities that exceed the present moment. The interactions that occur within classrooms always have the potential to go beyond the designs of teachers and policy makers. As Barnes remarks, ‘a curriculum made only of teachers’ intentions would be an in-substantial thing from which nobody would learn much’. For a curriculum to be meaningful, it ‘has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers’, forming part of an ongoing conversation between them as they all participate in the social life of the classroom (p. 14). To imagine that schooling should be solely directed towards achieving outcomes that have been specified in advance – that it is always a matter of measuring what individual students can do, rather than what they are potentially capable of achieving by participating in the social relationships that constitute any classroom – is a radically impoverished view of education.

The cases written by Prue, Bella, Mies and Ramon, all reflect a cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation that forms a context for practitioner inquiry. These teachers are doing more than weighing up the effectiveness of otherwise of their teaching strategies. Such a concern has its place within the world of educational practice – teachers are always seeking out ways to refine their teaching, to expand their repertoire of strategies in order to enhance the learning of their students. But the trouble with reflection when it focuses narrowly on ‘effective’ teaching is that it precludes any questioning of the meaning of what we do and whether the learning outcomes that we are trying to achieve have any validity. This is especially the case with standardised testing, and the dreadful practice of teaching to the test that is occurring in countries like the United States, England and Australia. Such tests purportedly measure literacy achievement, but what they really do is construct culturally loaded versions of literacy that devalue the literacies and cultures of whole communities.

By contrast, the teachers involved in this project are weighing up their approaches with respect to how they contribute to their ongoing conversations with the students in their classrooms. They obviously have a sense of what they would like their students to learn: Prue is endeavouring to enable her students to engage in a close reading of the text; Mies is encouraging her students to empathise with the main character of a novel; and Ramon is committed to exploring the potential of literary-theoretical frameworks for enhancing his students’ reading. These are dimensions of reading which, as teachers of literature, they believe are important if students are to meaningfully engage with the texts presented to them. Yet the type of engagement they are envisioning goes beyond any notion of reading as a
technical skill, locating it within multiple contexts beyond the classroom, including the lives of their students, the communities in which they live, and the larger society in which they will eventually take their places. They conceive of reading, in short, as a socio-cultural practice that should be the subject of continuing inquiry and reflection. For them, engaging with texts requires readers to draw on the personal, social, historical and ethical dimensions of their lives, constructing readings that go beyond the surface level of the words on the page and their dictionary meanings. As Bakhtin remarks, speakers do not find their words ‘out of a dictionary’, but ‘in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions’ (Bakhtin, p. 294). Out of those living situations, people take words and attempt to make them own. Mies, Ramon and Prue all conceptualise their classrooms as dialogical environments, both with regard to the way their students engage with the shifting meanings of literary texts as they might be constructed within classroom contexts (i.e. with respect to the complex interplay between texts and contexts that has been a focus of contemporary literary theory) and as a way of reading the classroom itself and all that occurs within it. They thereby speak back to the reductive and superficial way that standarised testing constructs teaching and learning within classroom settings. This is why they have participated in the inquiry enacted in this volume. As teachers of literature, they see such inquiry – such ‘praxis’ – as integral to their work.

And we hope ‘Dear Reader’ that you too will find that the conversation they have to offer you is worthwhile, that by engaging in this conversation you too can enact a critical ‘praxis’, reflecting on the assumptions that shape your own work as teachers as literature, and the histories, traditions, cultures and policies that currently mediate your professional practice. We hopen dat dit boek bijdraagt tot reflectie over het eigen literatuuronderwijs en tot een hernieuwde discussie over het ‘waartoe’ van literatuuronderwijs, een discussie die in Nederland te lang is uitgebleven (Van de Ven, 2004).

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**Piet-Hein van de Ven**
Graduate School of Education
Radboud University
Nijmegen, The Netherlands

**Brenton Doecke**
School of Education
Faculty of Arts and Education
Deakin University, Australia