

Writing and practitioner inquiry: Thinking relationally

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ABSTRACT: Alan Reid's (2004) article, Towards a culture of inquiry, constructed a sharply focused challenge to the wave of neo-conservative educational research and policy-making sweeping the Western world at the time. In contrast to the familiar deficit constructions of a teaching profession needing injections of knowledge, Reid envisions teachers as reflexive "inquirers into professional practice who question their routine practices and assumptions." His vision appreciates the value and possibilities of practitioner inquiry for enhancing an individual's knowledge and professional learning, while also generating knowledge and capacity for professional communities. This article investigates and critiques some possibilities of practitioner inquiry, especially forms of inquiry involving professional writing. A close study is made of texts written as part of a small practitioner inquiry project undertaken by English-literature teachers in a school in Melbourne. The writing of the texts in this project can be seen as both (1) reflective acts, articulating or clarifying current or past understandings of teachers and researchers and also (2) performative acts, allowing the "inquirers" to see beyond the immediate context of their teaching and research and to "think relationally" about the current and future possibilities of their professional practice.

KEYWORDS: Practitioner inquiry, professional learning, professional writing, literary theory, dialogic inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the century, a rare consensus has emerged amongst politicians, policy-makers, researchers, teacher educators and teachers across the Western world about the need to give higher priority to *teachers'* learning in order to improve *students'* learning.¹ Recent international reports (for example, OECD 1998, 2005a, 2005b), concerned with the role of education and schooling in the global "knowledge economy", broadly emphasize the need to support teachers' lifelong learning opportunities. In particular, they call for more practitioner collaboration, teacher networks and research-led innovation as forms of capacity building that are necessary to meet the demands of the future. Similarly, in Australia, Government-sponsored reports, such as *Australia's teachers: Australia's future* (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003), are often keyed into the discourse of the "knowledge economy" and Australia's competitiveness within this. Their local

¹ For example, the Allen Consulting Group 2003, Department of Education and Training [DE&T] 2004; NITL, 2005, in Australia; The US Department of Education, 2001, in the US; General Teaching Council for England [GTCE], 2004, Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas & Wallace, 2005, in the UK; Ministry of Education, 2006, in New Zealand. See also Cochran-Smith, 2006; Ingvarson, 2002; Lovat, 2003; OECD, 2005; Reid, 2004; and Siniscalco, 2005.

concerns increasingly focus on how to enhance experienced teachers' professional learning and how to address the high attrition rate of early-career teachers from the profession. The rhetoric is beginning to converge across these reports along the lines of: "high quality and pertinent professional learning and development opportunities" for teachers in schools are crucial in order to "rejuvenate, motivate and retain good teachers" (CRTTE, 2003, p. 39).

Presumably in response to such reports, regulatory bodies in Australia (such as the Victorian Institute of Teaching [VIT] and the New South Wales Institute of Teachers [NSWIT]), have introduced policy that requires teachers to account for their ongoing professional learning at regular intervals throughout their career. Teachers must now produce sustained reflective text of some sort (for example, in portfolios, research articles, classroom observations, or online reflective dialogues between a teacher and his/her mentor) that demonstrates their professional learning in order to gain or maintain their accreditation as teachers (see VIT, 2006; NSWIT, 2006). Some Australian teachers, like teachers in the US and the UK where similar requirements have been mandated in policy (see Delandshere & Petrosky, 2004; Ellis, 2006), see such policy as another instance of regulations and practices rigidly imposed on them by outsiders. To an extent this argument has some validity, as Smyth (2001) and Gale (2006) show. Notwithstanding these concerns, other teachers, especially English teachers, have welcomed the opportunity to engage in the "newly" validated activity (that is, in terms of government policy) of professional writing, as a means by which they might inquire into their practice (see, for example, Bellis, 2004; Piva, 2005). Even though their purposes as practitioner researchers might differ somewhat from the purposes of mandated policy, they can still see value in a policy which requires teachers to reflect and write about their professional practice.

One might even imagine a future where such writing is widely recognised and supported by governments, schools and teachers as a valid form of inquiry into teaching and as a generative stimulus for professional learning. Indeed, this is how Alan Reid imagined things might be in his landmark paper in 2004, *Towards a culture of inquiry*. Reid (2004) articulates a vision of all teachers in the 21st Century as "*inquirers into professional practice* who question their routine practices and assumptions and who are capable of investigating the effects of their teaching on student learning" (p. 3) [emphasis in original]. He sees the knowledge that these 21st-century teachers require as complex, rapidly changing and "context-bound" knowledge. Further, he explains that:

if the task of educators is to develop in children and young people the learning dispositions and capacities to think critically, flexibly and creatively, then educators too must possess and model these capacities (Reid, 2004, p. 3).

The present article is engaging in some of this imagining about the future, too. I argue that writing as a form of practitioner inquiry provides a valuable opportunity for the sort of questioning and investigating that Reid is proposing that teachers might do when they actively participate in "a culture of inquiry". To some extent, I think that this applies whether teachers voluntarily enter into practitioner inquiry projects in professional learning teams or communities, or if the writing is mandated by regulatory bodies or school administrations as part of accreditation or appraisal processes.

The imagining about a professional world which I am proposing to do crucially involves an acceptance that professional inquiry of this kind can no longer be understood as the preserve of select individuals or groups, who might be positioned as “different” because they are “teacher-researchers”, or because they engage in self-study research (for example, Stenhouse, 1975; Loughran & Russell, 2002). Reid makes a distinction between practitioner inquiry and research², in which he draws attention to the flexibility and comparative immediacy of inquiry work set against the particular requirements and protocols in traditional research outputs. Such a view of research is already being challenged by the proliferation of teacher narratives and other hybrid forms of writing produced by teachers in different contexts around the world, some of which are published in journals such as *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*. I am arguing for a notion of professional inquiry that blurs Reid’s distinction between inquiry and research, and I propose that this professional inquiry need not be something special, something which only a small band of exceptionally motivated teachers might do. Rather, such inquiry would be integral to the work of all teachers. In this respect, I am somewhat at odds with Reid’s understanding of a “culture of inquiry”. Nevertheless, I appreciate Reid’s awareness and sensitivity to the already burdensome demands on teachers. He wants to “lift the burden of being a researcher from the shoulders of busy practitioners” (Reid, 2004, p. 8).

It is part of the imagining of this paper that it might provide a basis on which to advocate to governments, school administrations and regulatory bodies, helping them to appreciate the valuable and time-consuming work done by teachers in practitioner inquiry, particularly those who write their way into understanding by keeping journals, writing narratives or creating other texts. In future, such inquiry could feature in teachers’ work, not so much as an extra burden, an “add-on” that must be squeezed into a teaching day/week that is already over-crowded with commitments and obligations. I look forward to a moment when governments, school administrations and regulatory bodies value practitioner inquiry to such an extent that they set aside time for it in school timetables and teaching loads – that they build in systems and structures that support practitioner inquiry as a fundamental element in teachers’ work.

TRADITIONS OF WRITING IN PRACTITIONER INQUIRY

In the meantime, for better or worse, it is clear that policy in some jurisdictions is now requiring teachers to generate some form of sustained reflective text as part of their professional practice. There has been a rich history of this sort of writing and inquiry in Australia built into the curriculum of pre-service teacher education courses (see Moni, 2006; Parr & Bellis, 2005; see also Britzman, 2003, for discussion of other countries), and in in-service English teachers’ practitioner inquiry and professional learning projects (see AATE & ALEA 2002, Comber & Kamler, 2005; Doecke & Parr, 2005; Meiers, 2005). Indeed, the literature contains many studies of practitioner inquiry by English teachers across the world, using a variety of approaches – for

² He makes particular reference to the ways in which conventional research requires “appropriate research methods and methodologies, builds upon the literature in the area being researched, is an accessible activity open to peer review, and that the knowledge that is being produced is applicable to other researchers and research contexts” (Reid, 2004, p. 8).

example, narrative inquiry, dialogic inquiry, action research, classroom observation, and so on (cf. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Kamler, 2001; Kooy, 2006; Nystrand et al., 1997; Petrosky, 2006). This literature documents teachers generating a range of reflective texts – for example, narratives, cases, portfolios, professional dialogues, research articles among others – and these texts include not just the written word in conventional print texts, but also visual texts and digitally-based multimedia texts, such as those discussed by Jewitt and Kress (2003). In all these cases, the teachers' writing or composing is inextricably bound up with the notion of practitioner inquiry.

Typically, the writing that is reported on in these studies of practitioner inquiry serves both as an account of that inquiry and, more importantly, as a mediating factor in teachers' ongoing professional inquiry. This notion of writing as mediating inquiry draws on the conceptualisation of language in the work of Vygotsky (1962) and Bakhtin (1981), wherein language and discourse are understood both to constitute and be constituted by the social contexts in which they exist. For teachers who write as a central part of their practitioner inquiry, writing is always a process of grappling with language (Doecke & Parr, 2005). Typically, teachers are working creatively and analytically, usually in some collaborative environment, in an effort to give an account of their inquiry, to clarify their knowing and to communicate this to themselves and to others. This is not to assume that all the text required of, or produced by, teachers through their grappling is richly research-based or critically grounded with some rigorously conceptualised analytical framework. For instance, the proliferation in the US and Australia over the last ten years of professional portfolios to measure teachers' performance has been accompanied by a number of telling critiques (for example, Burroughs, Schwartz & Henricks-Lee, 2000; Delandshere & Arens, 2003; Delandshere & Petrosky, 2000, 2004; Sachs, 2005). These critiques point to the rigid ways in which some of these portfolios are framed by regulatory bodies, and the formulaic nature of the texts which can be produced as a result. Indeed, one of my other aims in writing this article is to propose a discourse for critically engaging with and evaluating such texts.

PUBLIC TEXTS AND “OTHER TEXTS” IN PRACTITIONER INQUIRY

Doecke et al., in this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, write about the ways in which English teachers in the Standards for English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA) project (AATE & ALEA 2002) came together in a spirit of inquiry to write reflective narrative accounts of their teaching. The teachers used the *process* of writing these texts as a focus and prompt for their ongoing inquiry and professional learning. Some of the final text *products* came to be published as research narratives on the STELLA website (www.stella.org.au). In their status as public texts on a website, they stood then and continue to serve now as powerful artefacts that affirm the value of these teachers' professional knowledge and practitioner inquiry experiences. And they continue to stimulate professional dialogue and further inquiry as other teachers are invited into the “conversation”, as it were. No doubt a great deal of other text was written by teachers and researchers, but not published, that constituted and drove forward in meaningful ways the inquiry of the teachers involved in the STELLA project (see, for example, the “bridging statements” discussed by Doecke & Gill, 2000-2001, pp. 10-13). On the one hand, the writing of

these “other texts” can be seen as crucial to the production of the research products published on the STELLA website (www.stella.org.au). On the other hand, the act of writing can also be seen as embedded within and mediating the practitioner inquiry in which the teachers were engaged.

It often goes without saying that there is a large corpus of “other texts”, which are generated in and around such projects but which do not necessarily become public, as research texts published in professional journals or on websites. I’m not simply talking about the finished products that are typically associated with practitioner inquiry – such as teacher narratives, curriculum documents, resource books – but the proliferation of texts that constitute the professional world in which teachers live and breathe and work. They may be in the form of professional journals, email conversations, blogs, texts written in the course of professional inquiry sessions, transcripts of conversations, or texts that accompany some curriculum development documents (such as rationales); they may be texts generated as part of formal accreditation processes, or even more formal research-based essays submitted as part of post-graduate studies. Teachers are surrounded by texts, many of which arrive on their desks in the form of mandated policy, curriculum guidelines, school memos. They speak back to these texts in a variety of ways, not only through the narratives and articles that get published in professional journals, but through writing other texts as a part of their ongoing professional inquiry.

These “other texts” written by teachers – indeed, all texts generated within teacher practitioner inquiry – whether they are made public or not, can perform crucial roles in informing, focusing and mediating teachers’ learning, dialogue and inquiry. Many of them contribute to and generate ongoing professional dialogue and they can be a fundamental part of the collective production of knowledge about teachers and teaching that occurs when teachers reflect critically, dialogically and reflexively on their practice (Britzman, 2003). And as critically focused artefacts generated by teachers inquiring into their practice, these other texts might be seen to deserve the same level of critical interrogation given to public research texts written by those we may once have set aside as a special group of “teachers who are researchers”.

In other places (Parr, 2003, 2004, 2007), I have reported on the professional learning of a small group of English-literature teachers, who came together to inquire into the potential of post-structuralist literary theory to enhance their professional practice. In that project, The Inquiry Group, as they came to be known, met officially six times over fourteen months between 2002-2003. My role in the group shuttled between university-based critical friend, participant and researcher for the project. The teachers and I engaged in a range of collaborative inquiry activities such as:

- *reading* critical articles relating to post-structuralist literary theories and practices as they relate to the teaching of literature in schools;
- *talking* openly and reflexively about these articles – the teachers reflected upon their own professional knowledge and their practices as teachers of literature;
- *experimenting* with a number of professional learning practices and activities; and
- imaginatively *re-envisioning* English-literature classrooms with respect to this reading, talking, listening and experimenting.

A crucial part of their inquiry involved the teachers *writing* some narrative texts. In these texts they reflected on, and speculated about, some connections between their learning in and around these sessions and their own professional practices.

The practitioner inquiry of the teachers in this project is not to be conflated with “action research” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), or forms of practitioner inquiry that are developed around a specific intervention (for example, following a curriculum development directive of a government or school body). It is more akin to what Dorothy Smith (2002) argues about professionals acting and thinking “relationally”. For the English-literature teachers in this project, this meant thinking critically about the reading, writing, conversations and inquiry activities in which they were engaged as part of this particular project, and reflecting thoughtfully on the ways these might mediate their current classroom practices. It also meant seeing the immediate context of their classrooms differently, indeed, of going beyond that “immediacy” and understanding the relationships or larger contexts that mediate classroom and staffroom exchanges.

PRACTITIONER INQUIRY IN THE CURRENT POLICY LANDSCAPE

In the early part of the Twenty-first Century, despite the self-congratulatory rhetoric of *No Child Left Behind* (The U.S. Department of Education, 2001), politically motivated standards-based “reforms” of education in the US were having (and continue to have) unexpected consequences for the teaching profession there (Delandshere & Petrosky, 2004; Delandshere, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2004). In the U.S., as in other Western countries, government rhetoric had promised greater recognition of the “quality teacher”, while many teachers felt their professionalism and autonomy were being eroded (see also Locke, Vulliamy, Webb & Hill, 2005). Meanwhile, in Australia, centrally devised sets of generic standards were being promoted as a means of unifying and strengthening the teaching profession, at the same time that they generated more rigorous accountability regimes for teachers. Associated with this enthusiasm for generic standards was the call for a “stable and effective” professional development system that might enable teachers to meet the outcomes specified in the standards (Ingvarson, 2002).

There was a strong push across the Western world (for example, Centre for Applied Educational Research [CAER], 2002; Du Four & Eaker, 1998; Supovitz, 2001; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Ingvarson, 2002) for “effective” teacher professional development to be directly tied to (read “restricted to”) three elements: (i) the knowledge that students need to know; (ii) student learning outcomes as outlined in curriculum documents; and (iii) a set of centrally mandated, generic professional standards. By yoking all professional development to prescribed content and pre-existing outcomes and standards, it was thought, this would make it possible to identify and measure the effectiveness of an individual teacher’s engagement in a particular episode of professional development. There would be agreed and clearly demarcated inputs, and the expected outputs/outcomes would be easily identified. In this way, an individual teacher could supposedly be held directly accountable for any investment (input) made by a school or government in his/her professional learning.

One unintended consequence of this way of thinking (as reported in the U.S. – for example, Darling-Hammond, 2004) was that individual teachers were effectively discouraged from being creative or innovative in their professional practices. In such an environment, teachers are reluctant to take professional risks or to challenge dominant practices in their professional inquiry. The other problem inheres at a fundamental level. The paradigm of “effective professional development” proposed here by Ingvarson (2002) and others brackets out all socio-cultural research or inquiry into teaching that emphasizes the situated and provisional nature of teacher knowledge. It ignores most practitioner inquiry where teachers are collaboratively generating knowledge and understanding, using the contexts of their own professional practice as a source of inquiry. Typically, it proposes that teachers who engage in “effective professional development” must unproblematically appropriate teaching knowledge from an external or central source and apply it (as individuals) to their own setting.

At the same time that these calls for schools to adopt effective professional development models were being heard, significant voices in the English teaching profession in Australia, including those involved in the STELLA project (for example, AATE and ALEA, 2002; Green, Cormack & Reid, 2000; Doecke & Gill, 2000-2001), were invoking Barnes’s (1992) notions of negotiating the curriculum in terms of both student learning and teacher inquiry. They were advocating notions of practitioner inquiry that were ongoing rather than short-term, collaborative rather than individualistic, distributed (across networks) and yet locally situated. Accountability was acknowledged as an important element in inquiry, but it was more complex than simple calculations of outputs against inputs, or mapping of practice and knowledge against centrally prescribed standards. Just as in highly dynamic classrooms, where the learning of students can exceed the expectations of teachers, some of the most valuable professional inquiry that took place was in unexpected areas. The value of teachers’ practitioner inquiry in this paradigm could not be articulated in any managerial accountancy model, such as the banking model of education criticized by Freire (1972) (See Sachs, 2003, 2005; Parr, 2004).

And yet the seductive logic of the managerial input-output paradigm of effective professional development has persisted. In Victoria, right now, there is a parliamentary inquiry into professional development strategies that “work”, in the hope that these strategies can be “converted” into quality teaching, so that the value-adding of the strategies (cf. Doecke, Locke & Petrosky, 2004) can be readily seen and simply measured. Only two years ago, *Teaching Reading* (NITL, 2005), the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy in Australia, called all teachers to “undergo” professional development in a phonics-based approach to the teaching of reading for students in early years. This approach was conceived in a way that could be simply appropriated by teachers throughout Australia and used in any setting, “regardless of students’ backgrounds” (NITL, 2005, pp. 8, 9, 12, 33).³

Implicit in the logic of an input-output, accountancy paradigm of professional development like this is the assumption that there is a simple linear causality between teachers’ inquiry and the quality of their teaching. It assumes that any professional

³ See also Rowe, 2003; Hill & Crevola, 1998; CAER, 2002, who advocate similar paradigms of effective professional development. Invariably, the effectiveness of this professional development program they propose is “proven” by input-output calculations.

inquiry should *directly, immediately* and *measurably* impact upon the teaching of students, and it assumes that professional inquiry takes place before teaching (rather than through and within teaching, as in much practitioner inquiry). Further, it assumes that the particular impact of professional inquiry upon a teacher's teaching can ultimately be measured by student performance on tests "at the end of the line" (See Figure 1 below).

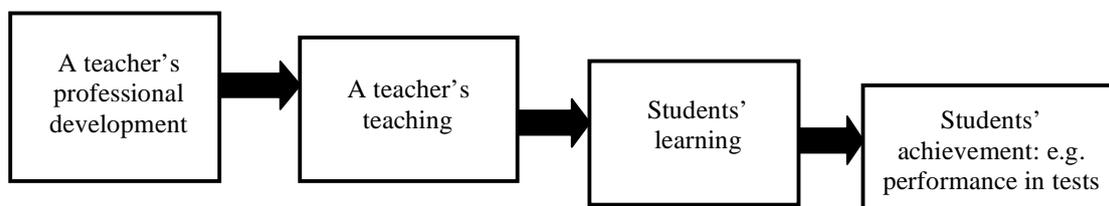


Figure 1: An input-output model of professional learning and student performance (derived from Supovitz, 2001)

Occasionally in Australia, and increasingly in the U.S., there have been attempts to quantify the extent to which teachers "convert" their professional learning into quality teaching, by focusing on the last stage in this linear process – that is, by measuring improvements in student learning outcomes – within a reasonably short time-frame. In Australia, a two-year long federal government-sponsored project led to a report titled, *Investigating the links between teacher professional development and student learning outcomes* (Meiers & Ingvarson, 2005). This project was established to identify and measure the impact of "best-practice", professional development programs upon student learning outcomes, consistent with the research of Supovitz (2001) (see Figure 1). The likelihood of being able to demonstrate this direct causal link was enhanced by narrowing the research focus to what was called "research-based evidence". In their report, Meiers and Ingvarson explain that this research-based evidence came from selecting only "PD [professional development programs] most likely to have an impact on teacher practices and student learning" (p. 1), PD programs "designed to lead to changes in teaching practices that are likely to improve student learning, and to *generate measurable outcomes* [my emphasis]" (Meiers and Ingvarson, 2005, p. 1). That is, the research had already bracketed out any professional inquiry that may have impacted upon student learning in less direct or measurable ways. Any program of professional development, or indeed practitioner inquiry, whose effects might not be easily and immediately measured, was not part of the "research-based evidence".

Notwithstanding these precautions, Meiers and Ingvarson are only able to conclude in their report that there are "difficulties in finding evidence about how teacher learning is linked to student learning" and that there are "many difficulties in researching the impact of teacher professional development on student learning outcomes" (Meiers & Ingvarson, 2005, p. 3). Indeed, their first major recommendation for subsequent research is that "it is essential, in investigating links between teacher learning and student learning...to avoid narrowing outcomes to those that can be easily measured"

(p. 4).⁴ In stating this so unequivocally, the researchers all but reject Supovitz's assumptions, which the project initially accepted as a framework for its inquiry into the value of professional learning. This recommendation is consistent with the arguments in a large body of research (for example, Elmore, 2000; Locke, 2004; Petrosky, 2003) that sees profound dangers in using the simple reporting of test scores to reflect the outcomes of professional inquiry. Indeed, the literature raises serious questions about the depth, value and flexibility of professional knowledge developed in a managerial professional development paradigm.

UNDERSTANDING PRACTITIONER INQUIRY DIFFERENTLY

Table 1 presents in schematic fashion the contrasting paradigms of inquiry discussed above, which currently shape debate and research about professional inquiry in Australia and internationally. Although this table does not do justice to the range of positions available, it serves to identify two broad competing trends within policy and research in relation to professional practice.

Typically, teachers who engage in forms of inquiry opened up by the understandings in the second column do so within a policy environment that imposes the understandings and practices outlined in the first column. They are working within a managerial environment, and it would be naïve to assume that this has no impact on their practices and on the way they understand their work. Any attempt to enact collaborative forms of inquiry and other alternative practices has to grapple with this dilemma. For the individual teacher, and for collaborative groups as in the project I report on below, this can be experienced as an internal dilemma – one involving intensely reflexive and critical reflection.

WRITING AND PRACTITIONER INQUIRY

I want now to focus more directly on the practitioner inquiry of the teachers in this project, which, to a large extent, drew upon the understandings of inquiry reflected in the second column of Table 1. The project was based in a large, single-sex (girls'), independent school in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne (referred to as Eastern Girls' College). As explained earlier, the teachers met officially six times in meetings of between 60 and 90 minutes, over a period of 14 months. All sessions were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. All readings (critical, research and literary) used in the sessions, along with any artefacts generated over the fourteen months, were archived. These artefacts included emails and reflective texts written by members of the group during scheduled sessions. Also archived were various curriculum resources that teachers presented to The Inquiry Group and used in their classrooms. In addition to this, I kept a detailed research journal, which included hybrid texts reflecting upon developments within The Inquiry Group and in the wider professional and policy landscape.

⁴ Two major research projects in the U.S. and the U.K., published around this time, also state this in the strongest possible terms. These are *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education* (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), and *Watching and learning 3: Final report of the external evaluation of England's "National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies"* (Earl, Watson, Levin, Leithwood, Fullan & Torrance, 2003). (See also Luke, 2004; Weiner, 2003.)

Managerial understandings of effective professional development	Understandings of practitioner inquiry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers are positioned as “individual professionals” (Caldwell and Hayward 1998). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching is considered to be collaborative in nature, a function of the network of relationships in which individual teachers and groups of teachers operate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of teachers and teaching is imported from outside (in the form of the latest research or policy mandates) and “delivered” through professional development programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of teachers and teaching develops from, and involves, sustained inquiry into teaching and learning by teachers, including through focused observation of learners.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of teachers and teaching is unproblematically avowed (as though it can be systematised into an uncontested body of knowledge or “truths”), and typically delivered as a remedy for deficiencies or gaps in teachers’ existing practices, regardless of the socio-cultural communities in which teachers are operating and the local knowledge those teachers have developed through working in those communities. Teachers are expected to uncritically adopt such findings and apply them to their own settings, regardless of their local knowledge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The findings of research into the knowledge of teachers and teaching are considered provisional and contestable, especially with regard to how those findings might be applied to a range of settings. Such findings provide an invaluable frame of reference for reviewing current practice in any setting, but they are also scrutinized carefully from the point of view of local knowledge and practice. Teachers engage in dialogue with such findings, in a spirit of continuing inquiry and research into their own professional practice.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of the knowledge of teachers and teaching is often demonstrated in large-scale surveys or “scientific, evidence-based research” (for example, NICHD, 2000; NITL, 2005), that systematically bracket out the specific nature of school communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of the knowledge of teachers and teaching is often explored in non-canonical forms of inquiry, such as action research, narrative inquiry, and other types of practitioner inquiry that include some focus on the nature of school communities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers’ professional practice is judged against pre-existing or traditional outcomes - outcomes which are unproblematically measurable, such as their students’ standardised test results – without any interrogation of what those tests purport to measure or whether they really constitute a full account of the range of experiences and opportunities schools offer students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers draw on academic and practitioner research and theory in order to review and critique their existing practices. Standardised testing can provide some insight into the learning of students, but it is combined with the teachers’ professional judgments, developed through their ongoing interactions with students. Educational outcomes are recognised to be richer than those measured by standardized tests.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers’ work is defined by others according to notions of a “performance culture”. Teachers are rendered accountable through narrowly framed “performance” appraisals which require them to specify targets (for themselves and for their students) and to demonstrate that these targets are achieved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers work together to create a culture of inquiry (Reid 2004) at their school in which everyone – teachers, students, parents – can participate. They are mindful of the managerial systems within which they continue to be accountable, but their accountability is part of a larger professional commitment to the welfare of the students in their care and the school community.

Table 1: Contrasting understandings of professional development and practitioner inquiry⁵

⁵ Derived from Doecke & Parr, 2005, p. 2.

The following text is my account, as critical friend and leader of The Inquiry Group, of the lead-up to one of our after-school meetings. The text began its life as reflective writing in my research journal. Up until now, this text has been one of those “other texts”, those which are not public but which, I have argued, are so important in practitioner inquiry and research into teaching. In earlier iterations of this text, as I grappled with the particular language and form that might adequately express my sense of the professional moment and its significance in the inquiry of the teachers in the group, I saw my writing as playing a useful role in the project. It was certainly helping me to understand the nature, the potential and the future directions of the teachers’ practitioner inquiry, in that project. Even now, as I frame the writing for publication as a public text within this article, I continue to derive value from this process of grappling.⁶

3.30pm. It’s the end of classes for teachers in Eastern Girls’ College. While they have been gathering together loose ends at the end of period 4 – periods are 75 minutes at this school – I have been setting up an empty classroom for the third session of The Inquiry Group. As usual, I have brought with me to the session a couple of plates of snacks, a bottle of wine, a carafe of water - nothing fancy – to help support the atmosphere of conviviality that characterises most of our sessions. The food and drink are waiting, as I am, at the side of an otherwise eerily quiet classroom. Room C6. In the centre of Room C6, on a nest of tables, a tape recorder sits amongst a selection of critical readings and some books.

3.35pm. Teachers begin to trickle into the classroom in dribs and drabs....To some extent, school life seeps into the room with them. One teacher is wrapping up a conversation, literally at the door of the room, with a student from last period of the day. Another teacher is on her feet, rummaging through papers in her office down the corridor from Room C6. When her phone rings she wheels around, glances at the phone, then at her watch. She pauses, the way a classroom teacher does when a student has posed an intriguing question. Then she turns on her heels, and heads toward Room C6, leaving the answering machine to deal with the call.

I notice that teacher after teacher enters the room exhaling deep ambiguous sighs – breathing out the challenges and excitements of the day. It was the same for me when I walked through the school gates, having left my office at Monash University just 30 minutes ago. In entering this classroom, now designated for professional learning, each of us is engaged in our own negotiation of the multiple boundaries between classroom, office, staffroom and this space....

In one respect there is something special about a scheduled professional learning event, at a particular time and place. We sometimes need help to carve out this space – a place and a time separate from the teeming activity of school and university life. And yet, I am conscious that we have all been, individually and in transitory groups, learning as we work all day. This learning is rarely about facts and formulas; it’s rarely about knowledge that can be packaged in clearly demarcated epistemological categories. Most of our professional learning is about generating “knowing” rather than absorbing knowledge. And this knowing can often be elusive, problematic and hard to pin down. Much of it happens in ambiguous spaces, as we negotiate professional and cultural boundaries. Leonardo (2004) calls such spaces the

⁶ And I presume my readers are also engaged in a similar process of “grappling” as they in turn interpret the text in their different ways.

“interstices of possibility in institutions” (p. 16). I like that, and I like Wenger’s (1998) idea of “boundary encounters” (p. 112). I’m reflecting on these things, as I wait to welcome my ex-colleagues, my research participants. Yes, we have all been learning for the whole of the day, but there is something alluring about carving out a designated space for inquiry with colleagues and friends...

I have included a sizeable excerpt from this text, partly to provide contextual detail about the setting, but also to suggest some ways in which hybrid writing such as this can be used to focus and mediate critical reflection upon one’s involvement in practitioner inquiry. Needless to say, the text cannot do full justice to the environment or the inquiry culture it seeks to represent. I am mindful of Bakhtin here, as I strive to pin down and finalise in this text that which is ultimately unfinalisable (cf. Morson & Emerson, 1990, pp. 36-40). And yet I appreciate that the striving for clarity and understanding, the grappling, is crucial to the writing and inquiry processes.

Significantly, neither the practitioner inquiry sessions evoked by the text above nor the spirit of practitioner inquiry which inheres in the act of writing the text can be evaluated by a simple inputs-and-outputs calculation. Nevertheless, as I have already shown, there are ways in which the writing of the text, and the existence of it as text for others to read, can be evaluated in more descriptive terms. (Later I will propose a heuristic for more detailed engagement with texts such as this.) The reflexive nature of the text encourages a sense of the inquiry simultaneously informing, and inhering in, the writing. It is not a matter of the inquiry having taken place, and the writing grappling with it afterwards, as if the writing could somehow be de-coupled from the inquiry of which it is a part. The writing is at once an account of practitioner inquiry, an act of inquiry, and a reaching out to connect with other inquiry (past, present and future), as it reaches out to communicate with its readers.

THE DIALOGIC POTENTIAL OF/IN WRITTEN ARTEFACTS

Early in the third meeting of The Inquiry Group, whose beginnings I describe above, the four teachers and I sat down and wrote in response to one of three prompts (see Appendix 1). After a break of several months since our first two meetings, I had signalled in an email to all teachers that our third session would begin with reflective writing about their practice and thinking in these past months. The teachers’ writing would reflect on the ways in which their learning about post-structuralist literary theory over the previous six months had influenced their classroom practice.

I shall focus on two reflective texts written by teachers (Jo and Robyn) in that session. Figure 2, below, outlines the analytical framework I shall use to investigate the teachers’ writing with respect to what I call the “dialogic potential” of their professional inquiry. My use of “dialogic potential” draws, initially, on Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of “dialogic orientation” (p. 279), which he uses when discussing the tensions and dynamism of all prose literature. The “dialogic potential” in the richest literary genres, Bakhtin (1986) elsewhere observes, derives from a “dialogic imagination” that can connect with existing genres and forms, and yet generate newer and richer genres and forms for representing the current world and for making meaning for a future world. In terms of the practitioner inquiry of these teachers, the

dialogic potential inheres in the possibilities of connections between people, language or ideas. These connections are at once analytical and imaginative/creative. My use of the term “dialogic potential” at one level simply means the inherent possibility or likelihood of a teacher’s language, concepts, actions, or relationships to connect with other instances of language, concepts, actions, relationships and...other teachers. Beyond this, the possibility of connecting holds the potential of generating deeper and further connections, deeper and further dialogue. One can also see here the potential for ongoing inquiry as the teachers continue to develop newer and richer ways to practise and “make meaning” in their professional lives.

The dialogic potential in the reflective texts I will discuss exists on multiple levels. It is more than a dialogue in a linear sense, more than a series of point and counterpoint gestures, statements and rejoinders, “in a dialogue laid out compositionally in the text” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 40). In setting out some philosophical ideas underpinning dialogism, Bakhtin (1984) argues:

Dialogic relationships are a much broader phenomenon than mere rejoinders in a dialogue...; they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life (p. 40).

The framework I will use here involves four categories of dialogic potential. Together these categories provide a way of reconceptualising professional practice and they offer a means by which teachers might reflect on their practice and/or their engagement in practitioner inquiry. More broadly, they constitute a framework for inquiry, for thinking relationally, for seeing beyond what is immediate or given, and for opening up a sense of the dialogic potential of practitioner inquiry in schools.

1. *Noticing dialogic potential*
This refers to the action of identifying or acknowledging a connection between people, language or ideas that is more obvious or explicit (cf. Mason, 2002; see also Moss, Dixon, English et al., 2004).
2. *Developing dialogic potential*
This refers to the action of making explicit or more obvious a connection between people, language or ideas that is implicit or less obvious.
3. *Speculating about dialogic potential*
This refers to the action of predicting or imagining a connection existing between people, language or ideas in a text or speech event that is likely to take place (or is likely to have taken place).
4. *Activating dialogic potential*
This refers to the action of applying a dialogic connection or potentiality (that is, usually one that has been *noticed* or *developed* or *speculated about*) in a different or new context. It might involve exploring the implications that such potential has within a familiar context (cf. Morson & Emerson, 1990).

Figure 2: Framework for investigating the dialogic potential of practitioner inquiry, particularly in written texts

The texts that the teachers began writing during this third Inquiry Group meeting (and which they completed in their own time after the session) discuss some ways in which

literary theories mediate their classroom practices and their professional lives more generally. Embedded in this discussion are various levels of reflection. It is possible to see in these texts how the teachers are enacting all four categories of dialogic potential outlined above: that is,

- They *notice* the dialogic potential of their own prior experience and inquiry and the collective experience and inquiry of teachers in The Inquiry Group;
- They *develop* or tease out the dialogic potential that they are noticing in their own inquiry;
- They *speculate about* the dialogic potential of that inquiry for their future classroom practice, their future inquiry and their developing professional identity; and
- In the very act of writing, they *activate* the dialogic potential of their inquiry with other members of The Inquiry Group.

Jo was a newcomer to The Inquiry Group. She had moved to Eastern Girls' College, Melbourne, in 2003, from a school in Perth, Western Australia, where she had taught English and literature for five years. Robin had been part of the first two meetings of The Inquiry Group in late 2002. He had then resigned from Eastern Girls' College to take up a more senior position in a neighbouring independent boys' college, Hilltop Boys' College⁷, at the start of 2003. However, he returned to Eastern Girls' College for the first meeting of The Inquiry Group in May of 2003. I will begin with Jo's text.

Jo begins by constructing a self-deprecating narrative of herself as enthusiastic, but somewhat "green" – an early-career teacher equipped with the gospel of critical literacy and keen to change the world, or at least to "convert" her students:

I recall being a teacher fresh from the Grad. Dip. Ed., starry-eyed and full of enthusiasm about providing my students with my new-found knowledge of critical literacy theory. "Evangelical" may be an appropriate word to use here. I had a file full of resources that I was going to use in my approach with my Year 10 class, in a co-educational school in one of the lower socio-economic areas in Perth. The two units I was going to teach focussed on "race" and "gender"....I was confident, passionate and certain that I could enrich and empower these students.

Well, it didn't quite work out like that.... I was firstly (in the gender unit) accused of being sexist, and then in the race unit of being racist!....With gender, the girls in the class tended to respond positively, the boys negatively. It was a mirror of what was happening in the larger culture, just on a smaller scale. I coped with my own version of the "backlash" by making sure I prefaced most of my discussions with "of course, this does not represent my opinion", and instead of placing myself at the forefront of classroom discussion, I provided instead more opportunity for students to work through the concepts with their peers. Gradually, changes began to occur....

There were, however, some students who never "came around", if you like.... Perhaps we will have to accept that we are not necessarily on a quasi-religious mission to supply more "converts" to critical literacy, and instead apply our critical gaze to our own agenda, and what we hope to achieve.... For what hope can we have of teaching our students to be self-reflexive, if we lack that capacity in ourselves?

Jo (text written for Session 3 of The Inquiry Group – May 2003)

⁷ A pseudonym.

Robin begins his text in pseudo-confessional mode. He feels a lack of connectedness between his senior English teaching at Hilltop Boys' College and his earlier participation in The Inquiry Group at Eastern Girls' College.

I have to admit that I have not yet brought much of our discussion [in The Inquiry Group] to my teaching of texts this year at either year 11 or year 12. I was a little surprised when I thought about it that I hadn't really contemplated integrating the ideas we discussed about text into my teaching [in my new school]. It is easy to nominate a number of possible reasons, but I think there are two major reasons. One is that I have been under pressure to prepare about 6 different texts to teach this year, all of which are new to me, and I see now that I reverted to very traditional ways in which I have approached the preparation of a new text for teaching purposes. I was busy matching outcomes, assessment, etc and targeting those to meet the timeline of the school agenda. But I think the more significant factor is my lack of confidence in the material [that is, literary theory] and the feeling that I have not fully assimilated the ideas for myself and how it would then lead to alternative teaching strategies for the exploration of a text....

One thing that excites me about literary theory...is the way that it opens up new ways of reading texts, even those which we feel we "know". I think too that it legitimises a plurality of responses rather than just an orthodox canonical response thereby giving students confidence in their own understanding and reading of a text. I think, too, that it "demystifies" the view that texts can only be read in one way and that there is only one valid way of reading/understanding.

Robin (text written for Session 3 of The Inquiry Group 3 – May 2003)

In the remaining space in this article, I will discuss some details in these two texts, using the four-part framework of "dialogic potential", and then using a related dialogic framework to look at the inner dialogue that animates the inquiry in Jo's writing.

DIALOGIC CONNECTIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS' INQUIRY TEXTS AND THEIR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

When considering Jo's writing, it is important to know that Jo began writing this text at the start of her first meeting with The Inquiry Group. Following the writing of this text, she was scheduled to give a presentation to all of us in The Inquiry Group about her experiences learning about and teaching critical literacy as an early career teacher in Western Australia.

Jo begins her text with specific contextual details of her school setting in Perth, Western Australia. Already she is *noticing* the dialogic potential in the connections (and disconnections) she is experiencing between her early years as a teacher and now, and between her time in Perth in relation to her time in Melbourne. When she writes about her students' responses (the "backlash") to her first efforts to teach with critical literacy discourses, and she outlines a change in her pedagogy over time ("instead of placing myself at the forefront of class discussion..."), she is *developing* this dialogic potential in terms of the contrasts between her first efforts and her change in pedagogy, and by implication (though not stated explicitly) her awareness of her current pedagogy in Eastern Girls' College. To some extent, Jo is taking a risk

and *speculating about* the dialogic impact such a story might have on colleagues whom she does not yet know well.

One complex element of dialogic potential that is worth exploring is the sense in which Jo is using her writing to *notice, develop, speculate about* and *activate* the connections and professional relationships she is building with her new colleagues. In one sense the writing of this text is one way in which Jo is *activating*, or negotiating, the dialogic potential of her professional relationships in her new school. She uses the writing to help her think relationally, and this seems to be part of Jo's effort to find a place for herself within this small community of practitioner inquirers. This is one aspect of practitioner inquiry that is utterly at odds with the notion that professional inquiry is all about appropriating teacher knowledge from some outside source and applying it in one's own classroom setting. In fact, it is a crucial element in Jo's inquiry at this point. Another interesting element is the way in which Jo, writing before the interactive part of the inquiry session begins, is connecting to/with the content of what she will soon speak about in her presentation to her colleagues. She may be *noticing* and *developing* the inherent dialogic potential of that presentation as she rehearses in her mind what she will say. She may also be *speculating about* or even rethinking (*re-developing*) some ideas she had planned to present to The Group. There is a sense in which Jo's text is an account of, and a reflection on, understandings about teaching with critical literacy that she has developed outside the act of writing this text. In another crucial respect though, her writing is performative, as it were, inquiring "out aloud" via a written text about her professional practice and her place in this new professional community.

As in the case of the other teachers' texts, Robin devotes early space to setting out specific, situating details. In doing so, Robin is signalling that *he* values this sort of contextual detail when constructing an account of his professional experiences and knowing. He can be seen *developing* the dialogic potential of this practice, and in this way he is both performing and affirming a part of the inquiry culture he shares with his past colleagues at Eastern Girls' College. He quickly proceeds to *notice* that he has "revert[ed] to very traditional ways" of teaching text in his new school in Melbourne. The writing in the context of this practitioner inquiry project seems to provide him with a space to be "surprised" and to "admit" this to himself and to other colleagues. It is in the space and time that writing affords that he *develops* "possible reasons" for his reverting to what he sees as very traditional ways.

It is interesting also to notice the way in which Robin, like Jo, moves from specific to general comments about some characteristics of his classroom practice with literary theory. In this approach, again, he can be seen to be *developing* and *activating* (through the act of writing) dialogic connections with his colleagues in The Inquiry Group. As members of a particular professional community (though not a static one), Jo and Robin clearly share some beliefs vis-à-vis the importance of contextualising and only then analysing their experiences. Together they understand the value of reflecting out aloud with colleagues (with all the professional risks this might entail) about their own practices. Finally, it needs to be said that the trusting and mutually respectful culture of this group of teachers would seem to be enhancing and enlivening the dialogic potential of their professional inquiry.

In this brief space, I have gestured at the ways in which a framework of *noticing, developing, speculating about* and *activating* dialogic potential provides an accessible and meaningful language in which to engage with these teachers' writing and inquiry. The distinctive point to emerge from this discussion is the value of writing as (1) a reflective act, articulating or clarifying current or past understandings but also as (2) a performative act, allowing teachers to inquire critically, creatively and relationally into possibilities, be they conceptual, curriculum-related or pedagogical. Up to now, I have focused on the dialogic potential of their writing and inquiry as it relates to their professional relationships and their professional identity. I want now to investigate the inner dialogue (cf. Wertsch, 1980) implicit in Jo's text as she writes about her understanding of critical literacy. In some respects, this approach allows me to pursue a more concentrated focus on an aspect of her emerging understanding; it also allows for a somewhat sharper analysis of the dialogicality of the language she uses. I will examine the inner dialogue in Jo's text through Wenger's (1998) frames of reification and/or participation discourses.

DIALOGIC CONNECTIONS WITHIN A TEACHER'S TEXT

A reification discourse, as Wenger conceptualises it, is premised on the assumption that it might be possible for language to pin down and locate a centred core of meaning in a word or phrase or concept. It is the sort of assumption made by those who claim a "scientific evidence-base" for their inquiry and research: that is, language is seen as the tool by which uncertainties can be made certain. In such reification discourse, ambiguity and shades of meaning need to be written out to ensure clarity of communication and purpose (Lather, 1994; MacLure, 2003). Participation discourse, in contrast, is characterised by a recognition that all language is unstable, that it is historically and culturally mediated, and that meaning is generated through active participation in socio-cultural practices. It proposes that all meaning inheres in a de-centred understanding of language and communication that constantly opens itself up to further questioning and possibilities. Wenger (1998) argues that all effective communication involves a "tight interweaving of reification and participation" discourses (p. 4).

As I have illustrated elsewhere (Parr, 2003), literary theory is a highly contested term both in schools and in the academy. After years of debate, academic books are still being published which re-visit, and to some extent re-ignite, past debates about the value or danger or even relevance of literary theory. The debate is often lively, with alternative positions raised and contested on all sides. Some of the prompts I gave to the teachers in the third session of The Inquiry Group (see Appendix 1) offered them the opportunity to engage with these debates. In Jo's response to the first of these prompts, she indirectly confronts some of the scepticism about the value of literary theory knowledge that she had heard expressed by one of colleagues in Eastern Girls' College.

Jo's text about her experiences of teaching with critical literacy⁸ opens with a more reified and more centred sense of knowledge – what she calls "critical literacy theory"

⁸ For the purposes of this discussion, I choose to treat the terms "literary theory" and "critical literacy" as interchangeable, mainly because Jo assumes this to be the case. Misson (1994) points out that this is a widespread view among teachers and academics (p. 1).

– whereas at the conclusion of her text she seems to be talking about a less reified, less centred sort of knowledge. What she presents at the start of her text as a tightly framed *body of knowledge* becomes, by the end, more like *emergent knowing*. This latter knowledge is expressed in and through participatory discourse. At the beginning, critical literacy is something clearly bounded, something congealed, something with a core: it is reified as a “file full of resources” that Jo is poised to “use”, and something which she anticipates “providing [her] students”. The lack of a preposition in this phrase makes the epistemological status of critical literacy ambiguous: it is either (a) knowledge as objectified tool that can be lent to students for them to use and thus to help them acquire their own knowledge, or (b) knowledge as object that can be given or transmitted to her students, or (c) both a and b. By the end of Jo’s text, however, critical literacy seems more like knowing than knowledge. It is “processual” rather than objective, as Bakhtin might say (cf. Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 50).

It is a significant moment in the text when Jo begins to speak about her approach to avoiding her students’ “backlash” by removing herself from the centre of “classroom discussion”. Thereafter, teaching critical literacy becomes a process of her students “work[ing] through concepts” with Jo scaffolding this process. At this moment, the language with which Jo describes her knowledge of critical literacy loses its sense of a central “core” of congealed meaning (cf. Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 270-1). Her final perspective on critical literacy is one where whatever knowing she is speaking about is decentred to such a degree that it is not even clear whether she is still referring to any bounded sense of critical literacy. The change of focus is significant. She moves quite quickly from a confident iteration of a clear, reified, congealed sense of *knowledge*, to an elusive, slippery, decentred notion of *knowing* (Wells, 1998). It is dialogically connected to different notions of critical literacy, and it is difficult to pin down. Nevertheless, the “sense” of it is still powerful and clear in her text. One might say “the sense” is elusive and recursive: it exists as both a dialogic discourse (in a lively, fecund pedagogical space, one might say) and as an ongoing dialogic stimulus (a tool or catalyst) for inquiry in a reflexive way, and for inquiring about reflexivity, as Jo claims.

I would argue that Jo’s dialogic shifting between reificatory and participatory discourses is characteristic of the ways in which focused writing in the context of less rigidly framed practitioner inquiry can work. In this respect, as in the sense of her negotiating professional relationships, this is performative writing, with Jo having some freedom and yet some structures to think relationally, to explore intellectual and pedagogical possibilities. It is clearly more than random speculation about these possibilities. Rather, Jo’s text shows her teasing out professional possibilities – through the very act of writing, she is re-imagining her classroom practices. Significantly, she brings a sense of closure to the noticing, developing and speculating she has done to this point, but even here the sense of resolution is provisional: “Perhaps we will have to accept...” and “What hope have we got if ...”.

It is interesting to interpret Jo’s relational thinking in terms of Wenger’s notions of reification and participation – it provides a useful frame to make sense of the tensions implicit in her practice and her inquiry. Jo’s text suggests a rich dialogic inquiry with herself, at least in the first instance, but it is clearly dialogic and generative beyond the confines of the text she has written here (cf. Wells, 1999). The text seems to be

drawing on the lively dialogic connections (the dialogic potential) that Jo is experiencing with colleagues in her new school (and her past schools), with the students she has taught in these schools, and with the critical literacy literature she has read and will read. This represents a healthy level of dialogic potential in Jo's ongoing inquiry and in her professional practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The widespread agreement (as outlined at the start of this article) about the importance of teacher professional learning for improving educational outcomes is a welcome development. If governments and policy makers can be persuaded, it holds the promise of more teachers being supported to participate in a range of "practitioner collaboration, teacher networks and research-led innovation". These are the sorts of professional inquiry activities and structures that international and national bodies have been advocating for some years now, and which English teachers in Australia enacted on such a broad scale in the STELLA project.

One of the most exciting aspects of this development is the prospect that more space and time might be "carved out" in teachers' working lives for more teachers to engage in diverse forms of practitioner inquiry. The form of practitioner inquiry discussed in this article is one where an innovation or "new" element of teacher knowledge is as likely to emerge from research activity *within* any collaborative grouping, such as through focused professional writing, as it is from other research undertaken wholly *outside* that community. When teachers are writing about their practice as a form of practitioner inquiry, the notion of "carving out" space is not separating inquiry and research from other teaching activity, but embedding the inquiry and research within teachers' multi-faceted teaching and learning lives.

The more widespread support of practitioner inquiry is not in itself a guaranteed boon to teaching and learning cultures. There may be value in re-visiting models of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) as an approach to practitioner inquiry, for instance. However, there are problems associated with using this form of practitioner inquiry if it is only to document the implementation of someone else's knowledge or innovations in one's school setting, and then supposedly to measure the immediate and direct improvements in student learning outcomes (cf. Supovitz, 2001). This is a far cry from Reid's vision of 21st-century teachers with the capacity to think "critically, flexibly and creatively" as they inquire into their professional practice.

There is always a danger that the rich potential of practitioner inquiry can be stymied by, or appropriated into, neo-liberal calls for scientific evidence-based research into teaching. Practitioners and researchers need to think strategically, to advocate their standpoint to governments and policy-makers, in order to avoid this. The challenge here is to conceptualise professional writing for the professional community and for others as not so much an account of inquiry or research that has been undertaken, nor as a separate activity done by a select few teacher-researchers, but rather as a rich and generative form of practitioner inquiry that is fundamental to teachers' work.

The samples of writing from members of The Inquiry Group at eastern Girls' College presented here illustrate just some of the manifold possibilities. In these texts,

teachers and researcher were drawing on traditions of teachers' reflective writing, but also playing with the dialogic potential of reflexive and hybrid forms of professional writing. The acts of writing these texts are both (1) reflective acts, articulating or clarifying current or past understandings and also (2) performative acts, allowing the writers to see the immediate context of their professional practice differently, to inquire critically, creatively and relationally into pedagogical, curricular or research possibilities. As readers of these texts, it is possible for teachers and researchers to appreciate and engage with the analytical rigour and the creativity involved in the now public products of these teachers' work as "inquirers into professional practice" (Reid, 2004), and to help them to imagine professional practices, and perhaps policy environments, differently.

All of the reflective texts woven into this article stand as affirmation of the teachers' professional knowledge and their inquiry experiences, even while only provisionally representing that knowledge and those experiences. In emphasising the provisional nature of the "truths" represented in these artefacts, I do not diminish their importance as research or inquiry artefacts. Rather, I privilege their dialogic status in the larger conversation and culture of inquiry in which practitioners and researchers operate. That is, I emphasise their dialogic potential in engaging with existing research and inquiry conversations, and in stimulating further research and inquiry.

We have seen and experienced, often enough, the value of teachers thinking relationally in their writing, and using this writing as a form of practitioner inquiry. I invite teachers (and researchers, of course) who might read this "public" text and the range of texts embedded within it to generate their own text in response. The texts they write may go on to appear as "public" research artefacts in a journal such as this, or in interactive online professional spaces. Or they may live on as one of the many "other inquiry texts" amongst which communities of teachers live and breathe and work. It seems to me that the more that such texts are being written and "living on", the closer we are to Reid's vision of "a culture of inquiry". Such writing takes time, sustained professional focus and energy. One looks forward to the moment when governments, regulatory bodies and school administrators might recognise all this. administrators might recognise all this.

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APPENDIX 1: Reflective writing activity scheduled for the start of Session 3 of The Inquiry Group. This includes choice of four stems that teachers were invited to use in their writing

Reflective writing (about 15 mins)

Please choose one of the following:

1. In our two sessions so far, we have talked about a range of ‘issues’ in relation to literary theory. What do you see as the central ‘problems’ of teaching with literary theory? How (if at all) have you dealt with these ‘problems’ in your teaching of (or preparing to teach) a senior literary text this year?
2. Do you remember the story, related in Deborah Appleman’s book, concerning the student who passionately upbraided her teachers for teaching her about deconstruction? It generated tremendous discussion in our group. Indeed, many of our group members have used stories as a productive way of opening up an idea with the group.
Give a brief account of a literary theory ‘moment’ – from your classroom or from the ‘staffroom’ (that is, English department). It does not have to be world-shattering or life-changing. As we know, sometimes it is the small or seemingly innocuous moment from a teacher’s professional life that proves most rewarding for reflection.
3. Finish some or all of the following stems. Feel free to write in more detail, or at greater length, in response to one or another of the prompts, as you wish.

One thing that excites / intrigues me about literary theory is ...

One aspect of literary theory that I want to know more about is ...

One way in which I feel my students have benefited from my interest in literary theory is...

One thing that (still) bothers me about teaching with literary theory is ...