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NEWSLETTER

EA
THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION



ORACY EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

What is the the role of speaking and listening in, and across, the curriculum?

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English Association Newsletter 236 Summer 2024

Edited by Professor Arlene Holmes-Henderson and Dr Tom F .Wright

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Arlene Holmes-Henderson is Professor of Classics Education and Public Policy at Durham University. Arlene holds a British Academy Innovation Fellowship investigating the relationship between oracy, social mobility and employability. She researches the intersection of ancient rhetoric, oracy and critical skills, and regularly discusses the learning and teaching of rhetoric at events for English specialists. In 2023, she collaborated with the English and Media Centre to create a free downloadable publication: Approaches to Rhetoric – a practical introduction for 11-14 year-olds. Working with Dr Tom Wright at the University of Sussex, Arlene leads on the Speaking Citizens project's engagement with non-academic stakeholders e.g. policy officials, charity representatives, teachers and learners.

EDITORIAL: THE USES OF ORACY

Arlene Holmes-Henderson and Tom F. Wright

In the last decade, a peculiar word has started buzzing in teachers' ears. A little word with big ambitions: the word *oracy*. It was coined in the 1960s by British educational researchers to refer to "speaking and listening" but has only recently become one of the most eagerly debated ideas in UK education, with growing importance internationally. In 2023 oracy suddenly became front page news, when the Labour Party brandished it as a flagship education policy. Since then, educators at all levels have been rapidly grappling with this sometimes misunderstood and poorly-defined idea. This educational approach looks set to influence the schooling of a new generation of pupils, and the development of a new generation of teachers in the UK and beyond. All of us in education, at all stages, need to get up to speed on what the implications of all this might be.

Yet oracy education is a political Rorschach blot. Everyone can see their own goals or fears reflected in it. The prospect of a 'speaking-focused curriculum' in state schools makes some people happy. Conservatives applaud oracy as a back-to-basics way of fighting declining standards and making pupils more employable. Progressives champion oracy as a tool for social justice, or a way of safeguarding civil debate and liberal democracy. Meanwhile, from all political sides, sceptics see a whole host of pernicious motivations. Critics on the right say that oracy is a fad that gets in the way of imparting useful knowledge. Critics on the left say that oracy just means powerful people telling poor and ethnic minority communities how to speak, while distracting from more pressing socio-economic reforms.

A vibrant debate is taking place amongst educators, politicians, charities and researchers over the value of oracy and the best ways it might be implemented at scale. This issue of the *Newsletter* is dedicated to showcasing this debate and pushing it forward. It brings together a range of voices from across the English Studies community and education more broadly, to illuminate current practice, research and policy in oracy education. It showcases perspectives from stakeholders across the education community to help develop new ideas that can be used in the classroom, specifically in the teaching of the subjects that make up English Studies.

In the first article, Geoff Barton, Chair of the National Commission on Oracy Education, introduces the current policy landscape and hints at the policy frameworks needed to enable high quality oracy education for all young people. In the following article, Catherine Pape, Welsh Government, asks whether 'oracy' is a useful term, and proposes instead "Speech, Language, and Communication" as a less unwieldy and off-putting term.

English specialists in many schools have been seen, rightly or wrongly, as the experts on oracy. They have been tasked with championing oracy, providing professional development training for colleagues and communicating its value to parents. Is this part of the English teacher's job? Are English specialists best placed to lead on oracy, or should others be involved? In the next sequence of articles, three

classroom practitioners offer reflections on their own practice. Freya Odell explains that oracy should be a feature of all classrooms, giving examples from her own English teaching experiences, both in the UK and in international schools. Emily Frontain cautions that oracy is not a 'quick fix' but encourages colleagues to invest time to embed oracy-focused activities in their classroom practice as they pay dividends in terms of student wellbeing, development and attainment. Nicola Wigmore provides insights from the Further Education sector, highlighting the need to help young people cultivate skills which will be beneficial for their future employability.

Thankfully, at this stage of the debate round oracy, there is a substantial body of empirical evidence on what works and what doesn't. In his chapter, Gavin Illsley of the speech education charity the English-Speaking Union reflects on an action research programme run by the English-Speaking Union together with the AHRC-funded project Speaking Citizens at the University of Sussex in which teachers (early years to further education) are supported to undertake practice-based research to inform future directions in oracy education at the classroom, key stage or whole-school levels.

At a time when schools are facing challenges posed by technology and AI, interfering with the reliability of student learning, one solution is perhaps focusing on the development of authentic individual voices. Stephanie Miller, a teacher in the international sector, outlines common problems encountered by teachers relating to AI, student progress and assessment. She offers advice based on professional experience and academic research. Lin Goram brings insights from teacher education, identifying the importance of oracy for linking idea generation, reading, writing and vocabulary. Tracy Irish describes how young deaf people are improving oracy via the Signing Shakespeare research project. Using the Total Communication approach in combination with collaborative theatre practice and a range of technologies, this project is changing how young people with SEND access a high quality oracy education.

For the Greeks and Romans, oracy was inextricably linked to citizenship. In order to participate fully in civic life, it was essential to be able to self-express effectively and to listen critically to fellow citizens. The issue closes with Ed Sweett's perspective on how a focus on oracy in schools might reverse democratic decline in the 21st century; using old methods to solve new problems.

We hope that these articles inspire further publications by practitioners. By sharing the breadth and diversity of current approaches to oracy education in a range of educational contexts in the UK and beyond, we hope to stimulate further conversations about the role of speaking and listening in, and across, the curriculum. For further resources and perspectives on oracy and the politics of speech education, readers can visit the Speaking Citizens project website at www.speakingcitizens.org, where they will find plenty more ways to understand the challenges and promise of oracy education.

We invite you to read the English Association's response to the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education.


ORACY EDUCATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE
Join us to continue the conversation
Monday 16 Sept 2024
16:30 - 17:45
Online
All welcome
Go to www.englishassociation.ac.uk/events

THE EA'S NEW HONORARY OFFICERS

I am honoured to have been elected Chair of The English Association by the Board of Trustees for the next three years, along with Elizabeth Draper and Alex Thomson as Deputy Chairs. Between us we bring a wealth of leadership experience in the secondary, further and higher education sectors.

Elizabeth Draper was, until recently, the chair of the EA's Secondary and Further Education Committee. She has over 30 years of experience teaching English, including as Head of Department of Ashton Sixth Form College in Greater Manchester and later as Director of English at an FE College (Warrington and Vale Royal College). Many of you will already know Elizabeth for the force for good that she truly is for her sector. Alex Thomson, also well known to many of you, is Professor of Modern Literature and Critical Theory at the University of Edinburgh, and Head of the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures. He was the Chair (2017-22) of University English, in which role he developed the collaboration between UE and the EA. He brings essential expertise on data and academic publishing, crucial for us to understand in this period of upheaval for higher education institutions and academic presses.

Of myself I will say only that I have chaired the EA's Higher Education Committee for a decade, a role I have loved thanks to the amazing colleagues on the committee with whom I have had the privilege of working. Indeed, I might have regretted my decision to step down had I not handed on the baton to the brilliant Katherine Baxter, Deputy Faculty Pro Vice-Chancellor, Northumbria University. Katherine has already made many valuable contributions to the EA, and she has many more ideas. She was on the organising committee of English: Shared Futures 2017; she was editor of *English* 2016 -2020; she helped to shape our response to the Advanced British Standard consultation this year, and she co-leads the Decolonising the Discipline initiative. She will bring new energy and fresh thinking to HEC.

I am stepping down in order to step up at a very challenging time for our subject, as we see so many university departments contracting, and/or being restructured, while schools and colleges struggle to recruit English teachers. When I first joined the HEC 12 years ago, much of our work involved responding to government green and white papers. But that changed significantly about 5 or 6 years ago. Although we still lead on consultations, most recently the REF 2029 Open Access Consultation, overseen by Greg Walker, we are now activists and advocates for English Studies. Digesting the qualitative and quantitative data produced by the British Academy's Policy team on the careers of graduates in the Arts and Humanities helped us produce our **Toolkit**. It also provided us with the data we use in the letters that we write in collaboration with the Institute for English Studies and University English, in support of colleagues fighting for their jobs. We have aimed to give Senior Management Teams practical solutions to challenges, for example, building Hubs with colleagues in Multi-Academy Trusts around departments struggling with recruitment, or giving colleagues advice on data so they can contest the predictions about growth and decline provided by data-harvesting companies. At the same time we have been

celebrating the work of colleagues across the UK in our Speaking for English series, showcasing REF 2021 impact case studies in the areas of the environment, economic impact, health and well-being, policy-making, and technology.

The EA is about to change yet again. We are moving from defending to *thinking forwards*, working across the sectors to tell new stories about English Studies, and to imagine our future, exploring how we collaborate across disciplines – Maths and English in schools for example, or English Language or English Literature and Neuroscience in universities. With you we want to understand the new areas that might shape a new government's educational policy (e.g. oracy), as well as the skills we teach that are needed in an age of AI.

With this in mind we will be building on work we have been doing for a while under 7 key headings: Collaboration; Connecting; Data Science; Diversifying; Empowering teachers; Oracy; and Skills. To do so we are drawing on the expertise of members and Fellows to shape our thinking as an association, and we will build content and resources with you, our community. We plan to hold briefings on a different theme each month, free to all members and Fellows, sharing new knowledge, shaping it with you. These areas will also feed directly into the way we work with Multi-Academy Trusts, under the direction of Becky Fisher, and the kind of CPD we will offer. Finally, data – and data literacy—are areas we will develop as an organisation, led by Alex. Along with IES and University English, and with support from Edinburgh and Newcastle Universities, we managed to raise sufficient funding to work with a values-led data company, SUMS Consultancy. With them we are gaining more accurate data for our sectors so we can improve our understanding of the changing shape of English Studies. (It is really important to me personally that we change the data culture, so data collection and storytelling is not something that is done *to* us, but rather something that is done *with* us.) From this summer, the EA website will host a dashboard with authoritative data on English Studies, and this will be updated annually. We will offer a webinar explaining the work Alex has done, and how.

Together with you we want to grow the English Association, drawing on and celebrating our Fellows' and members' expertise, making our association a joined-up, well-networked, knowledge-rich, and celebratory home for *associating* for everyone who studies, teaches, and cares about English Language and Linguistics, Creative Writing, and English Literature. Katherine, Becky, Alex and I will continue to work with all of those at risk who reach out to us, working alongside, and in collaboration with, our sister bodies, IES and UE. Recognising that so many departments are being restructured we are also now working alongside colleagues from Modern Languages, from the University Council for English, the British Academy, and the Arts and Humanities Alliance, writing joint letters of support for those colleagues at risk in departments of literature *and* languages. Thanks to this work, and for the first time in the history of the EA, I will join the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages in June to talk about contractions in HE, making common cause with our colleagues in Modern Languages. At the same time, Becky, Elizabeth, and Robert Eaglestone will continue to build bridges across the educational sectors, advocating for changes

to the GCSE, and also creating space for cross-sector conversations and knowledge exchange. We understand that our future depends on working together, across sectors, and with other bodies. We value our longstanding friendship with the IES, and University English, and we are also looking forward to working ever more closely with colleagues at Poetry by Heart, NATE and NAWE, the National Network of English Subject leads, UKLA, and CLPE.

None of our ideas would be imaginable without the work of our former Chair (now President), David Duff, and Deputy Chair, Susie Nicklin, as well as our treasurer, Helen Wallace, and, of course, our brilliant CEO, Becky, and her team, Clare Barlow, and Lily Moran, who have put in place an infrastructure we can build on. I want to pay tribute to their work. Thanks to this team our publications have the support they will need to meet the challenges facing academic publishing in this age of Open Access; we are now working with Multi-Academy Trusts, creating spaces of exchange across sectors; and we have launched the first phase of the Choose English campaign. And, most excitingly, we have a new home. The EA office has moved from the University of Leicester to the School of Advanced Study, Senate House, London. We look forward to working with our brilliant colleagues at IES, and thinking about the future of humanities with everyone in the School of Advanced Study.

The EA is changing then, and I'd like to end by noting a few other 'new' things. This is only the *second* time in its 118-year history that the English Association has appointed a woman chair! My predecessor was the utterly brilliant, Elaine Treharne (2000-2005, the Roberta Bowman Denning Professor of the Humanities, Stanford University, and the Director of Text Technologies.) With four co-leads – Becky, Elizabeth, Alex and me – as well as new chairs of our two of our Educational Committees, and Kirsty Hewett, the Chair of the Primary and Early Years Education Committee, we are embedding co-creation at the heart of our organisation. This is a *first* in the history of the EA, and I am grateful to the Board of Trustees for putting their trust in us. Our ethos of co-creation and collaboration extends also to the Fellows and members: please advise and join us.

Jennifer Richards, FBA, FEA
Chair of The English Association
English 2001 Chair, University of Cambridge and Fellow of Peterhouse
Visiting Professor, University of Newcastle



Elizabeth Draper FEA

Elizabeth has over 30 years' teaching experience in both Sixth Form Colleges and colleges of Further Education. She now works freelance providing CPD and mentoring and is also a member of the OCR English curriculum consortium, the AQA English Discussion Forum, and the JOYFE movement. Elizabeth is an active participant in projects and research, with a focus on GCSE English resits.



Professor Jenny Richards FEA FBA FRHistS

Jenny is the English (2001) Chair in the Faculty of English at Cambridge University, and a Visiting Professor at Newcastle University. Jenny chaired the Higher Education Committee for a decade, and in addition to her role as Chair, is leading the EA's work in advocacy for the discipline.



Professor Alex Thomson FEA

Alex is Professor of Modern Literature and Critical Theory at the University of Edinburgh, and Head of the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures. In addition to his role as Deputy Chair of the EA, Alex chairs the Publications Committee. He is a former Chair of University English.