

Professional development

Opportunities for professional development with English conferences and online events

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In his book *Literature: Why It Matters*, Robert Eaglestone introduces an intriguing metaphor to describe the essence of literature: “literature is a living conversation” (Eaglestone, 2019: 21). Like a conversation, literature is concerned with communication, and thrives on interactions and dialogue. Usually in the classroom, the essence of literature as a conversation is clear to observe as learners read and discuss texts together, in groups, pairs and with their teacher. In literature conferences and other professional development events these conversations continue to shape thinking and understanding of literature. As with many other aspects of the novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020, conversations and communication in literature teaching are constrained by the distance format and must evolve in response. Related to constraints in the language and literature classroom which affect dialogue and interaction, professional development activities in 2020 are also beginning to adapt. The move online amongst academic conference planners has brought a shift towards innovative ways of delivering content, which matters for those of us working with literary texts and literary conversations in our online classes as well as in professional development during this unusual year.

This short article reports on three online conferences and professional development events which took place from May to July, 2020 which all share a need to engage with communication, now perhaps more than ever. While we may not be able to hold events in person at the current time due to concerns for safety, one of the benefits of the situation has been the richness of variety, as well as the potential for greater collaboration and international communication in the future. The information will be useful to those planning online conferences, and for anyone seeking to participate in online professional development through literature events.

Hay Festival Digital 2020

<https://www.hayfestival.com/>

The Hay Festival is one of the most important book events of the festival season in the UK. The speakers are

typically some of the most important writers and journalists whose work has become culturally important in the previous year, and the event usually takes place in Hay, a small town filled with bookshops on the English-Welsh border. From May 22-31, over 100 festival events are available, subject to pre-registration. This year, for the first time, the entire event went digital and sessions were available free. The sessions had live question-and-answer sessions usually focusing on one recent publication, but sometimes with wider topical questions. Some sessions (David Crystal and Hilary Mantel, for example) were fully booked early, even with thousands of spaces available. However, it was possible to watch the talks later in the day because of the time-difference, which was a convenient feature of the playback platform used for this event.

A number of presentations were noteworthy and potentially useful for teaching purposes. The first was a session by Stephen Fry in which he read from his book from the third book in his Greek trilogy, *Troy* (2020). Fry’s reading aloud became well-known from the *Harry Potter* books, but his appearances on radio and television mean that UK audiences have known and enjoyed Fry’s writing and presenting for many years. The online format was successful in bringing the speaker closer to the audience, while viewers’ questions were handled smoothly. Reading aloud is a familiar teaching approach and is one which requires careful planning (see Duncan & Paran, 2018, p.151-253 for a discussion of teachers’ perspectives on read aloud practices in English classes). In the current online teaching situation, it may be easier than before to include reading aloud as part of the asynchronous course content, or as part of the homework schedule. While reading aloud may not be part of a typical live lesson, listening to readings before class or integrating listening elements into group work and homework are ways in which this approach may be adopted by English literature teachers in a variety of contexts.

Moving on to historical fiction, Maggie O’Farrell’s novel *Hamnet* is an emotional and fictional retelling of the family life of William Shakespeare, centring on the death of his only son. At the Hay Festival, the timing of

the presentation on *Hamnet* coincided with the lockdown of schools and a nationwide furlough of workers in the UK, rendering cities unusually quiet, including London. The current pandemic therefore has echoes of Shakespeare's time, which was an era of societal worry and fear. As O'Farrell writes, *Hic incepit pestis* or "here begins plague" was written in the town records at Stratford only months after Shakespeare was born, and his life was spent in a time of endless rounds of outbreaks of the disease. Inclusion of pandemic reading will surely become part of English curricula in future years. Linguistically, O'Farrell used the Oxford English Dictionary to confirm the meanings or words in the book which were accurately used in the 16th century. While all the metaphors had to be checked for anachronisms, her aim was to try to be modern and try not to grate using language in ways that would contradict the flow of the story.

For second language (L2) readers of English literature, there are various reasons why *Hamnet* may be useful as part of a course of study focusing on English culture. The link between the son's name and Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is explained in the opening pages of the novel. Important documents such as letters have not survived, however, and O'Farrell's novel is a clever work of imaginative writing. Details from the era have been meticulously researched, for example with the inclusion of details about the uses of medicinal herbs in Shakespeare's time. Teachers of creative writing are likely to be particularly impressed with the opening chapters of the novel and the world-building which transports readers into O'Farrell's fictional world. For close reading, teachers could draw attention to what Fowler (1996) called the *mind-style*, that is the "world-view of an author, or a narrator, or a character" (214). More recently, Semino (2008) specifies an individual's world view in relation to *mind-style* as being "personal and cognitive in origin" (Semino, 2008, p.269). Expressions of world view by Shakespeare's wife Agnes in *Hamnet* may be particularly suitable for shared reading, analysis and discussion. The later scenes of the book, taking place in London, contain further rich pickings for close reading and textual analysis.

The Hay festival, along with other online book events this year, is a rich source of material for teachers planning literature courses. Further themes in 2020 include moves to decolonize the English curriculum and pay greater attention to diverse literature. Overall, while Hay online may not be a free online event in years to

come, regular online book festivals would be a welcome addition to the cultural calendar.

English Shared Futures

<https://www.englishsharedfutures.uk/home/programme-2020/>

English Shared Futures Conference is an annual event in the UK, supported by groups such as the National Association for Teachers of English (NATE) and the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), amongst others. Despite organisers increasing capacity to 700 participants for the live online conference, it sold out more than a month in advance. I was not one of the lucky ones with an official place at the conference. However, engagement with the talks and interaction with the conference was still possible through a number of routes. The first was the use of Twitter, as many attendees and speakers interacted online during the conference on 26th-27th June to share their experiences. The conference recordings were also available online after the live event. Over the next couple of weeks, I watched a selection of the recorded talks.

"The Discipline in 2020" was a session with a panel including leaders from NAWE and English department heads from various universities. The fallout of the pandemic is already affecting teachers in English and creative writing. One concern of the speakers at this session was that lecturers are becoming more embedded in the gig economy as part-time, adjunct staff, affecting the discipline of English. Several of the talks were concerned with how to respond to the current crisis, of urgent and immediate relevance to the audience.

"Future perfect: How applying linguistics in the real world moves the discipline forward" was a session in which three presenters shared their schemes of work, themed units and individual activities are taught in various levels of school English. David Adger (<https://davidadger.org/>) from Queen Mary University of London described uses of invented languages from fiction, such as teaching students to write their own names in the Elvish languages from Tolkien's (1962) *Lord of the Rings*. The activities could be adapted for young elementary learners, up to intensive summer school work, or integrated into the linguistics elements of English literature courses. In other summer school projects with particular schools, students developed imaginary languages and the rules for their own languages, creating presentations and posters using their projects. What may be particularly relevant for teaching

in Japan is that in the current move towards CLIL courses, it is not yet fully defined what integrated content means, and that language and literature may be more closely aligned than before.

Jennifer Smith from the University of Glasgow talked about sociolinguistics and the variation of Scots in use. The focus was on Scots specifically, although the topic of variation in language might be relevant for studies of sociolinguistics. One result of the heightened awareness of Scots on websites such as public websites and libraries having more visible uses of Scots. The Scottish government made a language policy in 2015 to forward this aim. With particular emphasis on the syntax (order of words) in Scots across the country, the project developed a project looking at variation and language change in Scotland: <https://scotssyntaxatlas.ac.uk/>. From this it is possible to see the change in language (defined as the difference between younger and older speakers). Applying principles of exploring language variation in Japan would be possible project work for students in the Japanese context, for example looking at linguistic variation in Japan, in literature, and in other creative texts, such as film and poetry. The third speaker in the linguistics session was Devyani Sharma from Queen Mary University of London who talked about the development of A-level (high school) English language teaching units from the London perspective. As English no longer belongs to any one geographical area, students examine English – including vernacular dialects of English – from around the world. Using the example of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a way of discussing this variation, in part because of its familiarity for students and also for the potential uses of the topic in English classes.

Kate Clanchy's presentation, "Write a poem about lockdown" was an interactive workshop in which she presented her teaching methods and also some poems by secondary-level students from the UK. Clanchy's interactive session, and her wider work on teaching poetry in schools, exemplifies how literature can be like a conversation, not only in that it involves communication, but also that it is a product of the environment. Clanchy has worked as a Writer in Residence in a multicultural school in Oxford and has, in 2020, been awarded the Orwell Prize for her book about teaching poetry *Some kids I taught and what they taught me* (2020). Her methods include writing alongside students and collecting their work (the excellent *Poems from a school*, 2018 is an anthology of student writing). In her latest book, *Unmute* (2020) we can read the poetry

which resulted from writing from the lockdown. The lockdown workshop described the classroom writing process, showed work from students, and then invited participants to try the writing process for themselves. She used an environmental poem by Hirshfield (2017) as the basis for exploring the lockdown experience. The result was a series of lines which were read out as though they became a shared poem, written by everyone in the session. I thought that writing poetry at a distance in that way would be difficult, or even impossible. This session proved the opposite.

Action on teaching university English online

<https://www.englishsharedfutures.uk/satellite-events/#english-online>

This event was open-access, subject to pre-registration, with a video of the session available after the recording of the live session. As well as the national conference organised by English Shared Futures, I joined a live satellite event on the topic of online teaching on 3rd July. The format was mini-presentations of five or ten minutes each, and the speakers covered a variety of topics. Each of the speakers at this special event had a short time to briefly introduce how they have prepared for online teaching from September. The focus was on preparation for the new term in September. The focus was on discipline-specific training, relevant to all of the different branches of English study, including language and literature, as well as creative writing. However, a number of presenters already had extensive online teaching experience, so the session included a range of experiences. The following are a selection of the talks which were delivered at that event.

The first session was one hour long and included five speakers, with Robert Eaglestone from University of London introducing the session. Andrew Griffiths from the Open University gave some advice from a long experience of using online teaching materials. The Open University has been delivering online content for many years before our current situation of online teaching. In his talk he discussed the differences between online teaching and distance learning. He used the metaphor of a seance, suggesting that at the start of an online lesson we ask "can you hear me?" to students, many of whom may have their cameras switched off. Online literature conversations are not like those we are more familiar with, which can be disconcerting and even alarming. Griffiths' advice on getting past this is to embrace the

challenge of the unnatural element of one-sided communication inherent in online teaching. The surprising shift to online lessons may have been sudden for many of us, but we can learn from other situations who have been more prepared.

Benjamin Colbert from the University of Wolverhampton discussed virtual learning activities (VLEs) using examples from courses using literature which often have a thematic or chronological approach. Semester activities online could include online events, where students use a period or theme to create an online role-play activity. The example of William Wilberforce and the abolitionist era (as seen in contemporaneous literature) was used to show how historical periods could be enlivened through this method. Victorian studies could be used to ask students to gather information about the time, using newspapers and other primary sources in the classes and in group work. Students can gather resource banks (visuals, texts, and references) which can be relevant to the unit in question.

The second session was entitled “Reflective Online Practice: Teaching and Learning”, and included talks on teaching tools and ideas. These included ways that teachers can engage with creative reading and creative writing activities through workshops. Marcello Giovanelli from Aston University demonstrated how to work with an interactive tool called Blackboard Collaborate, which allows for breakout rooms, interactive whiteboards and chat-style messaging. While many teachers are trying to gather information about teaching online from generic online training, it is also worthwhile looking at subject-specific activities which are relevant to English teaching at the current time.

In the third session, “Digital methodologies and approaches”, the talks expanded understanding of how to build community in the digital space. Shelly Harris from the University of Reading talked about interpersonal connections while teaching creative writing. Looking to more established contexts could be helpful in developing creative writing in EFL classrooms in Japan. Other topics in session three included online writing days (Sean Sutherland, University of Westminster) and learning communities (Sophie Nicholls, Teeside University).

Overall, the satellite event from English Shared Futures was particularly interesting for the JALT audience who will likely be doing professional development online for some time to come. The ten-minute presentations were brief, with the five-minute talks possibly too short, but overall for audience

experience the short talks were successfully pitched. Many of the presentations provided a rich opportunity for speakers to interact with online learning in a subject-specific way. There is a lot to like about the online format of webinars and conferences in which the intimacy of face-to-face interaction is retained and yet large audiences are possible.

Conclusions

At the beginning of the year when most of our teaching for 2020 was being prepared and planned, we could not have imagined that by summer we would be reflecting on several months of lockdown, cancelled outings, and online teaching. This unusual year, 2020, has the potential to bring about new conversations about literature, language learning and society. The relationships between writers, readers and language learning contexts may expand and evolve with these new developments.

The online conferences and other events which have unexpectedly become available during this time have been one of the few positive aspects about the global pandemic. Not only are these conferences now available, but most are free or at reduced prices, meaning that professional development of this kind may be evolving towards a more sustainable model. International travel was costly and environmentally unsound before the pandemic, but it seems reckless and impossible now. The appearance of online events for professional development may be a lasting change which English teaching requires to allow us to continue the connections and conversations we all need.

Author Biography

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