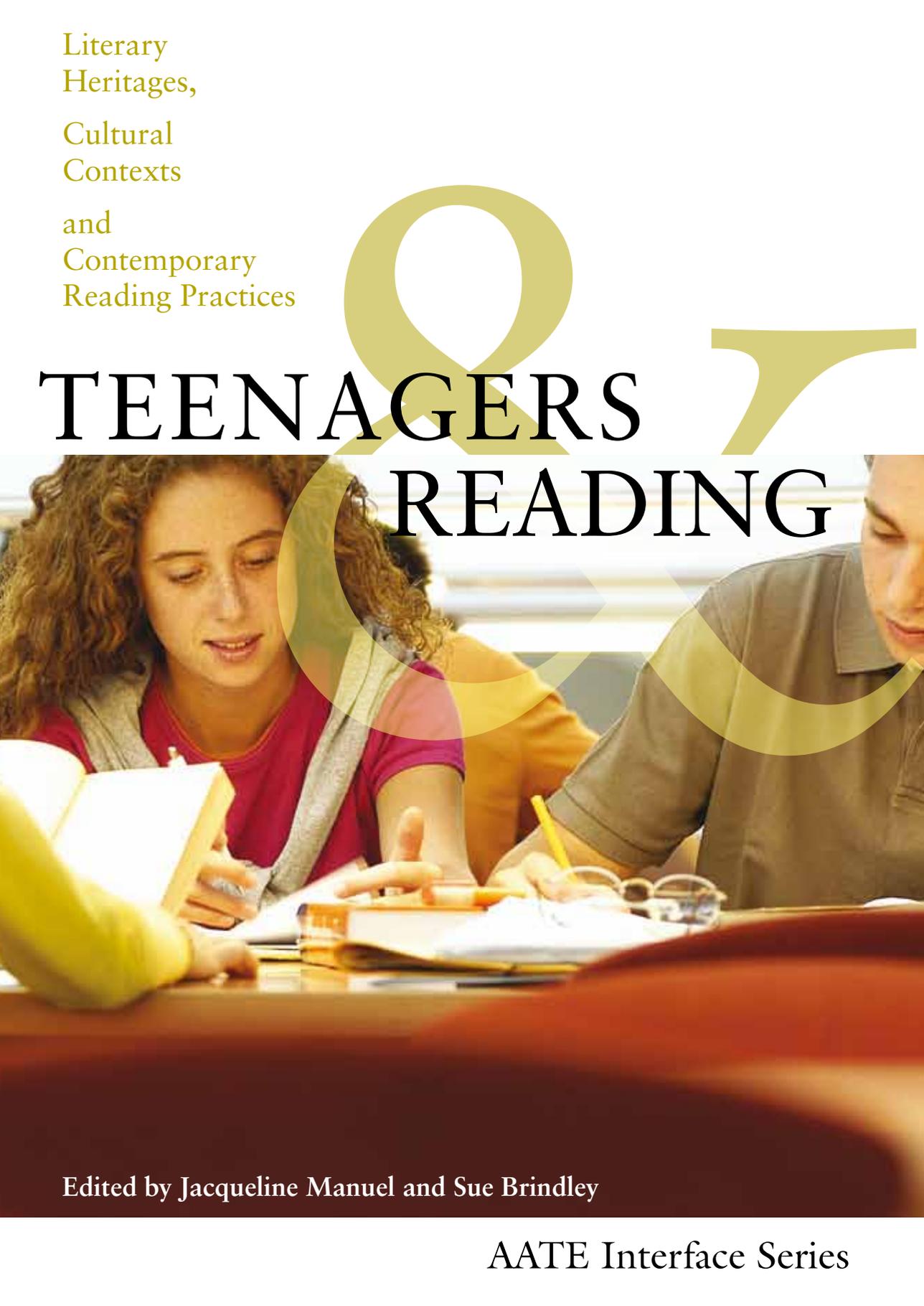Literary
Heritages,

Cultural
Contexts

and
Contemporary
Reading Practices

TEENAGERS & READING

Edited by Jacqueline Manuel and Sue Brindley

Teenagers and Reading

Literary heritages, cultural contexts and
contemporary reading practices

AATE Interface Series
Series Editor: Cal Durrant

The AATE/Interface series comprises a range of books for teachers who are committed to researching their own teaching – teachers who work at the interface between theory and practice. Interface titles all have a practical edge, in that they include ideas developed in the classrooms, for use in the classrooms. Yet they are far more than a set of resources. The primary purpose of the AATE/Interface series is to address significant issues in English curriculum and pedagogy, and as such it represents a substantial contribution to our knowledge as English teachers and literacy educators. To date, the series consists of:

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Teenagers
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Reading

Literary heritages, cultural contexts and contemporary reading practices

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Government
of South Australia

Arts SA

fox creek
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Contents

How well (s)he's read:
From sandbox to silicon screen

Cal Durrant

Teaching younger pupils to read was along the lines of the Lancaster or Bell systems. 'The children traced letters in a sandbox in front of them on a command from a monitor. Each child traced and copied and retraced till he [could] make the letter himself without the monitor's assistance. The letters were learnt in order of formation – lines (I H T L E F), angles (A V W M N Z K Y X – v w k y z), then circles and curves (O U C J G D P B R Q S – a o b d p q g e m n h t u r s f j). The monitor smoothed the sand for each boy (for the system was originally designed to teach only boys) with a flat-iron.'

(Reeves, 1996, p. 183)

It's hard to believe that barely two centuries have passed since Australian school students were taught to read and write using sandboxes. Along with the rest of my Grade One peers, I recall being released at recess time – after grappling all morning with nib and ink – to go and 'play in the sandbox' at a small primary school in the southern suburbs of Perth during the late 1950s. Yet, my memories are not of retiring there to practise our alphabet or to refine our handwriting skills. Rather, the sandbox was where we fought fierce territorial battles and took our lives and reputations in our tiny hands by pitting ourselves against those who were far bigger and stronger than we were; it was also the place to which we retired to lick our wounds in defeat once our betters were sated with victory and had triumphantly returned to the girls' shelter sheds.

Earlier this year, in preparing a presentation for my Master of Teaching Language and Literacy I class, I examined three recent TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design: http://www.ted.com/pages/about) presentations on Language Acquisition, Technology and Reading. My aims for the presentation included engaging our student teachers with some of the current research regarding child development, reminding them of the potential roles that technology may play in future examinations of longitudinal classroom

experiences, raising their awareness about traditional notions of reading and what they might mean in the classroom environments they will inhabit in the not-too-distant future, and to do so using a medium to which they were less likely to have been exposed and thus reinforcing the impact of the presentation themes themselves.

The three TED talks comprised Patricia Kuhl's research on the apparent genius infants have for learning languages until they reach the grand old age of seven; the fascinating technology developed by Deb Roy and his team at MIT that has allowed them to track the language development of his young son over a two year period and to convert this data into what are truly mesmerising multi-dimensional 'word-scapes'; and finally the development of the first feature-length interactive book by Mike Matas from Push Pop Press.

The following diagram is a black and white, two-dimensional representation of my *Prezi*, as it is known, the software that enables a less linear dominated format than more traditional and comparatively static PowerPoint
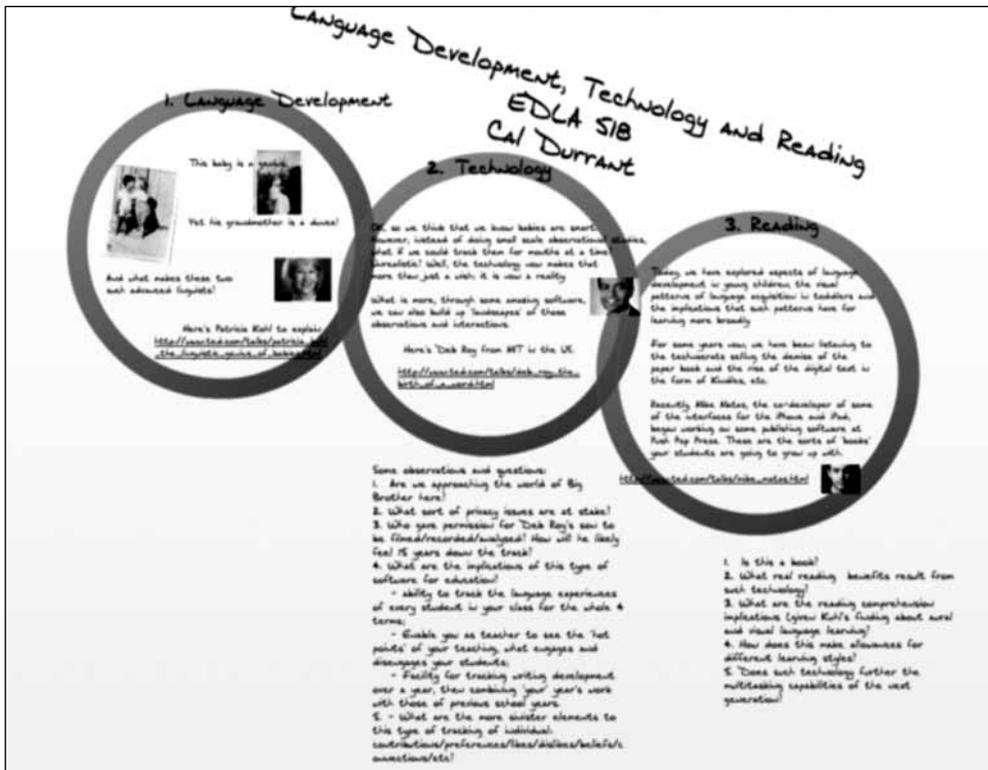
Diagram 1
Durrant, C. 'Language Development, Technology and Reading' Presentation, ACU, May 2011.

presentations so widely used by teachers throughout Australian school and university classrooms.

As this was my first amateurish attempt with *Prezi*, it is a very simplistic example of one application of the software, but what it lacks in sophistication, it makes up for in directness in showing ways that one can combine words and both still and moving images, track seamlessly within the overall presentation design and cut back and forth between its organising structures. For example, I used a simple 3-ring design because my presentation happened to have three organising aspects. The following is a screen capture representing an enlarged version of the first stage of the presentation, that is, the top left ring from Diagram 1.
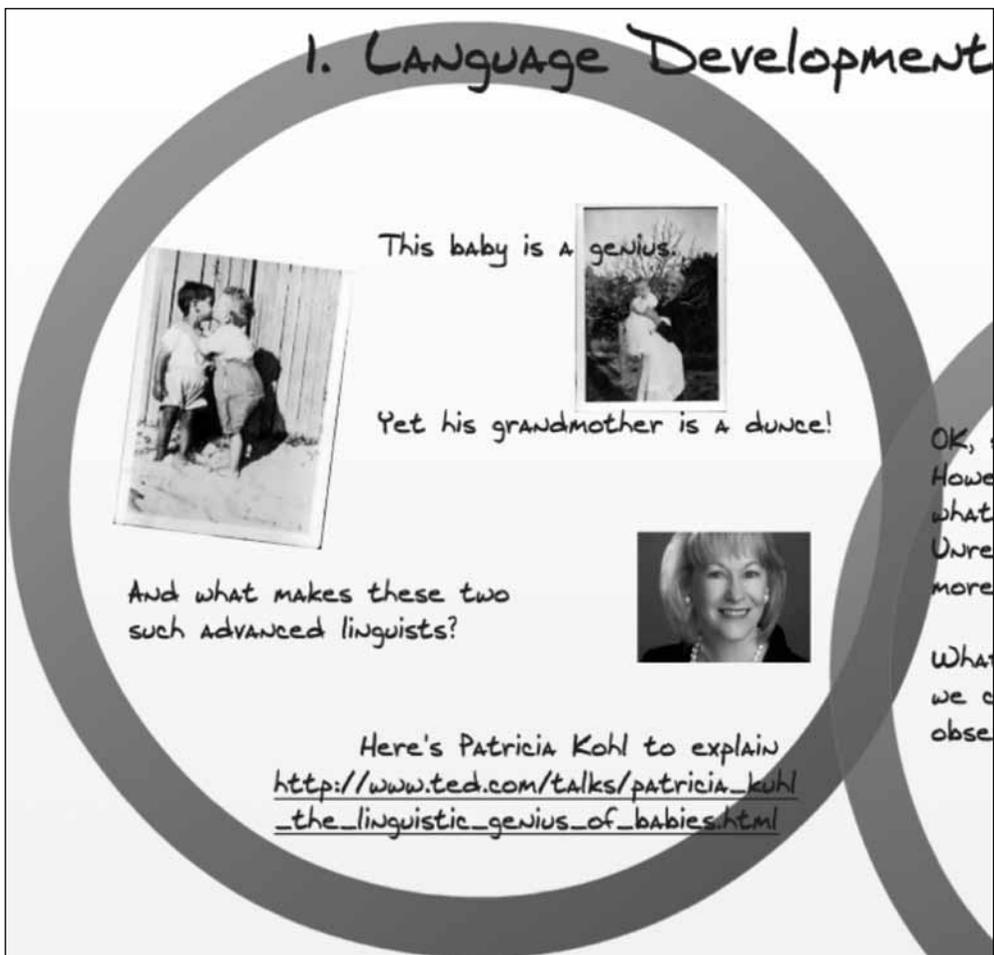
Diagram 2
Durrant, C. Stage 1: 'Language Development', ACU, May 2011.
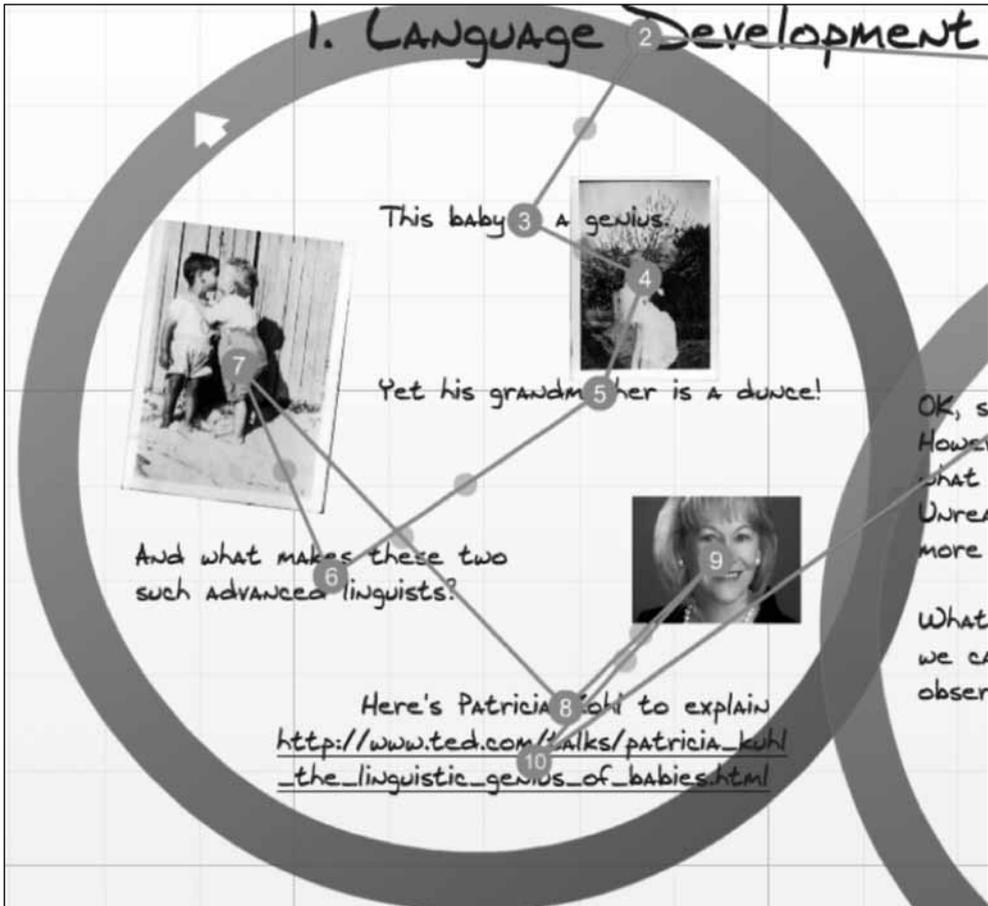
Diagram 3.
Durrant, C. Stage 1: 'Language Development' – Showing Presentation Pathways, ACU, 2011.

Represented as it is in two-dimensional format, the presentation is a rather elliptical and seemingly disconnected set of images and captions that doesn't conform to traditional notions of pedagogical narrative, but this is where the *Prezi* design affordances are so arresting. There is still a linear pathway, but not in a standard 'page' sequence; rather, the image pans and zooms according to the directions you have laid out for it and in a pathway that suits your design and/or presentation format. This is activated much like PowerPoint in that you still use the left and right keyboard arrows, but it gives the impression of flying through the visual space from one focal point to another rather than turning separate pages in a slide show. And if you use the up and down arrows, you can zoom closer or wider depending on what you want to examine: the minute detail or the overall context.

As a *Prezi* beginner, I undoubtedly overused this capability, and I suspect many of my students experienced a measure of discomfort during my presentation, not unlike the motion sickness that some viewers suffer when they watch 3D movies. In Diagram 3, you can see how *Prezi* allows designers to construct the pathways to viewing. I have repeated Diagram 2 but overlaid the pathways directions that orchestrate the zooming effect so that you might imagine the visual order and thus construct some sequential sense from the diagram. For those readers who have not used or seen *Prezi*, the numbers refer to the sequential 'moves' where the focus pulls to the next close-up 'frame' when you press the right arrow on your keyboard. Of course you can interrupt this sequencing at any time by using the up/down arrows to tighten or widen the frame or to return to the overall organisational design.

My students were somewhat mystified by the captions and assertions I had placed below some of my family photographs, but 'got it' once they had seen the Kuhl video and understood the linguistic context. For students used to reading standard text, this type of visual leaping about requires that they stay alert in order to make sense of the sequences of images, words and sounds presented to them. It is not just a matter of following a linear progression; it involves synthesising written information and visual and aural stimuli and positioning each within the design pattern they are first shown and to which one might frequently return. This requires audiences investing considerable confidence in the designer/presenter/teacher that the pathway laid out for them will somehow lead to a knowledge point beyond where they started at the beginning of the presentation. It is not unlike the establishment shots at the beginning of a feature film – or for that matter, the opening pages of a novel. Just as Coleridge suggested so long ago, as audiences/students/viewers/colleagues/readers, we exercise a willing suspension of disbelief in the hope that narrative order will be established, and that sufficient signposts will be provided by the author/director/composer for us to begin constructing meaning out of what we see/hear/read. Of course, as English teachers and educators, we may also believe that the journey is sometimes more valuable than the arrival at a predetermined destination, a realisation that our 'evidence-based', data loving politicians might well benefit from being reminded of from time to time.

To return to my chapter title and opening quote, just what do the tracing and clearing of letters in a sandbox for early 19th century school children have to do with designing and composing a *Prezi* palette for 21st century student teachers? Well, a number of things come to mind.

Firstly, the fingers in the sandbox and the flat iron erasers of early school literacy instruction differed very little from my own ink stained fingers gripping the smooth wooden handle encasing the metal nib and laboriously tracing over printed letters strategically angled beneath my grubby exercise book sheet in the late 1950s. Both seem now to have more in keeping with mediaeval instruments of torture than what they actually represented at the time, that is, the best available social networking tools of the day. For the early school monitor, my 1950s exercise book would have been the equivalent of having access to a hundred or so vertical sandbox drawers per student per subject – a logistical impossibility within the crowded classroom context – while my *Prezi* is the modern equivalent of containing the entire contents of my Grade One writing exercise book on a single design space, and being able to access any one of those 'pages' without trawling through the entire book to find it. Yes, the capacity to achieve educational ends is magnified many times over with each historical leap afforded by more advanced technologies, but in saying this, they are still just tools of instruction, though 'just tools' perhaps underplays what each new technology promises, enables and ultimately dictates for both students and educators.

Secondly, the preparation of any type of public presentation is time consuming, requires considerable thought and – precisely because it *is* public – attention to detail. I am certain that no 19th century beginning writer agonised any more over the forming of his/her letters than I did over the planning, designing and sequencing of my *Prezi*. Any kind of creative work demands effort; modern day presentations are no exception and in fact may be more demanding simply because of the expectations created by occasion and opportunity. Generating student interest and engagement were probably not high on the outcomes lists of 19th century school monitors nor (so it seemed to me) my own literacy teachers of the 1950s, but as a 21st century educator, it would be cavalier of me indeed not to consider such presentation issues as imperatives in any classroom/lecture preparation.

Thirdly, software presentation editors are largely dominated by Microsoft's PowerPoint technology. It is rare to sit through a keynote or plenary session at a conference, a lecture in education at university level, or increasingly, a school classroom English lesson without negotiating a set of PowerPoint slides. The effect of this ubiquitous presentation editor is that it has locked speakers/lecturers/teachers into an unambiguously linear pattern of information presentation and processing that has roots in much earlier technologies.

As Edward Tufte (2003) pointed out nearly a decade ago, slideware technology is really an electronic version of overhead projection sheets (which were themselves more manageable versions of a blackboard), and because its interface design invites the use of 'bullet points' as slide organisers and emphasisers, preserves the place of the presenter/lecturer/teacher at centre stage in the educational process by suggesting how information is organised, presented and processed. The result is often as Tufte argues, that yes, the ' … slideware may help speakers outline their talks, but convenience for the speaker can be punishing to both content and audience' (Tufte, 2003). Students or readers/listeners frequently refer to this as 'death by PowerPoint', and there is no getting away from it, we've all delivered our share of 'Grim Reaper' presentations to students over the past decade or so!

Is this the fault of PowerPoint?

Well, I tend to agree with those who say that poor presentations are the result of poor presenters rather than the tools they work with (Communication Partners, 2003; Dancheva, 2011). On the other hand, just as the sandbox, the black/whiteboard and the OHP were limited by their design technologies, PowerPoint is similarly limiting because of its emphasis on separate page/slide progressions. *Prezi*, on the other hand – while still possessing its own constraints as it continues to evolve – does allow a presenter to return to the overall presentation shape, diagram, picture or design at the click and drag of the mouse because one is only ever focusing on different and seemingly unlimited spaces of the same slide at any point in the presentation. There is no trawling back through individual slides/pages to try and find what you are looking for in answer to a student question about something you have mentioned earlier in your presentation. What you see in micro detail is always part of what exists in macro form, and on the same 'slide'; thus it is always available. This means that in any well structured presentation, what is being focused on in the moment can always be contextualised within the framework of the bigger picture both speedily and fluently.

This is not an uncritical endorsement of the *Prezi* software; rather, it is an attempt to demonstrate that with each generation of technological developments, it is the affordances of the technology as much as our thirst for better and faster ways of doing things that drives new pedagogical methods. While I am not ready to declare that PowerPoint is dead and thus: 'Long live PowerPoint!' I do think that zooming editors invite presenters to find new and more collaborative ways of engaging with their audiences. It may well be

the beginnings of a new way of 'reading' informational presentations from both ends of the pedagogical spectrum.

Which brings me to this book. AATE is particularly proud to be launching a text on reading in 2012 – the National Year of Reading, and the editors Jackie Manuel and Sue Brindley are to be congratulated both for assembling such a practical set of commentaries on teenagers and their reading practices and for taking the broad church view of the act of reading that they have. I remain amazed by the changes in reading contexts that have taken place during the fifty years that constitute my own exposure to classrooms and school education, and who can predict what might unfold during the remainder of this century? Nevertheless, reading in its most traditional guise is as important today as it has ever been. 21st century school students are required to be able to read above, below and between the lines in ways that were never envisaged by their grandparents. Which makes a book of this nature so singularly important for today's students, their parents and teachers.

While technology will continue to create new and useful variations on the act of reading – just as *Prezi* challenges the way we might now 'read' PowerPoint – it would be a brave technicist indeed to predict the demise of reading itself, whether that be on the shifting surface of a sandbox, the tattered pages of a well-loved paperback or on the slick silicon screen of the latest Kindle. Or just as Shakespeare expressed it so succinctly in *Love's Labours Lost*: 'How well he's read, to reason against reading!'

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Cal Durrant

AATE Interface Series Editor

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Teenagers and reading: Literary heritages, cultural contexts and contemporary reading practices

Jacqueline Manuel

We are a jaded lot, we in our threatened world. We are good for irony and even cynicism. Some words and ideas we hardly use, so worn out have they become. But we may want to restore some words that have lost their potency …

We own a legacy of languages, poems, histories, and it is not one that will ever be exhausted. It is there, always.

We have a bequest of stories, tales from the old storytellers, some of whose names we know, but some not. The storytellers go back and back, to a clearing in the forest where a great fire burns, and the old shamans dance and sing, for our heritage of stories began in fire, magic, the spirit world. And that is where it is held, today.

Ask any modern storyteller and they will say there is always a moment when they are touched with fire, with what we like to call inspiration, and this goes back and back to the beginning of our race, to the great winds that shaped us and our world.

The storyteller is deep inside every one of us. The story-maker is always with us. Let us suppose our world is ravaged by war, by the horrors that we all of us easily imagine.

Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise. But the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill.

It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed.

It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth-maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative.

(Doris Lessing, Nobel Lecture, 2007)

Lessing's vision of the centrality of story, story-telling and story-making in our individual and collective lives goes to the heart of why this book was written. As educators, we are impelled by a belief in the sovereignty of story: our stories, our students' stories, the 'bequest of stories' from others and the stories that have yet to be told and heard. Our English classrooms stand as one of the few remaining 'meeting places' – a 'still point of the turning world' (Eliot, 1969:173), a 'clearing in the forest' – where the prismatic and transformative power of story-telling and story-making can coalesce, come alive and flourish. Every act of reading, writing, talking, listening, viewing and representing, however subtle or apparently insignificant, is an act of participation in communicating, receiving, interpreting and making sense of our own and others' stories of what it means to be human.

Teenagers and Reading: Literary Heritages, Cultural Contexts and Contemporary Reading Practices offers an opportunity for us to reclaim, reconnect and re-member: reclaim the breadth and potency of our rich heritages of language and story in our teaching and learning; reconnect with the creative, imaginative, practical and theoretical centre of gravity that shapes our work with teenagers; and re-member the store of beliefs, aspirations and ideals that drew us to the teaching of English.

The manifold cultural contexts we experience, the pressures wrought on our teaching lives by the increased emphasis on high-stakes testing, curriculum reform and continuous administrative and accountability demands, often leave little room for the kinds of ongoing professional conversations, reflection and fine-tuning of our expertise that are so vital for our sense of efficacy and satisfaction as educators. Almost three decades ago, Garth Boomer urged the English teaching profession to

> *Re-imagine yourselves. Reconstrue … Jettison the accretions of pedagogical clutter … Freshen up. Simplify. Look again. Re-discover … your teaching wisdom; the elegant, small bundle of things to take with you wherever you go; a set of beacons for the dark-side of pedagogy; anchors in the storm of post-modernity; infinite generators and liberators for hard times … Today, let us exhume buried principles; foundational notions; forgotten fundamentals.*
> *(Boomer, 1993, p. 3)*

This passionate appeal to 're-discover' our individual and collective 'teaching wisdom' is as timely and resonant for today as it was in the 1980s.

Teenagers and Reading is about re-discovering and re-focusing on the actual and potential role and significance of reading in the lives of young people. Underpinning the chapters in this book is the assumption that reading is understood in its most expansive sense: that reading encompasses for example, reading of print, non-print, multimodal, film, visual and non-verbal texts and language; that reading is both an individual and social practice; and that aesthetic reading of literary texts should take precedence over efferent reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). Importantly, reading as a language mode is assumed to be continuous with and integral to accomplishment in the other language modes of writing, talking, listening, viewing and representing. Pope's set of principles about the relationship between the language modes underlines the assumptions about reading evident throughout *Teenagers and Reading*:

1 In reading texts we rewrite them.
2 Interpretation *of* texts always entails interaction *with* texts.
3 Interaction *with* texts always entails intervention *in* text.
4 One text leads to another and another and another – so we had better grasp texts *intertextually*, through comparison and contrast.
5 One's own words and worlds are necessarily implicated in those of others – so we had better grasp our selves *interpersonally*, through dialogue, voicing conflict as well as consensus.
6 Deconstruction is best realised through *re*construction – taking apart to put back together differently; just as *critique* is always, in a radical sense, about re-creation.
7 For *interpretation* can be done through acts of creative performance no less that of critical commentary. And we are all in various ways both performers *and* commentators, critics *and* creators.
8 In sum, *textual changes* always involve social exchanges. You can't have the one without … the other … and one another …

(Pope, 2003, p. 108)

This book brings together international perspectives that explore the 'what, how, when, where, and why' of teenagers' reading, offering us 'foundational notions' and 'forgotten fundamentals' about what works when it comes to reading achievement, engagement and enjoyment for our students.

It addresses those questions that shape so many of our daily encounters with our students:

- In an age of pervasive digital media and technology, what are our students choosing to read and why?
- What determines their choices and invests them with purpose?
- When are they reading and how are they reading?
- How do we as teachers re-engage disaffected, reluctant, resistant and under-achieving readers?
- How do we recalibrate our pedagogy to effectively integrate communication technologies for purposeful learning?
- What are students' attitudes and responses to required reading in subject English?
- What is their self-image as readers?
- What are the implications of this for pedagogy, curriculum innovation, student repertoires of knowledge, skills and understanding and their achievement and satisfactions in English and their lives more broadly?

Each chapter offers teachers not only insights into the reading lives of teenagers, but also a wealth of practical approaches to teaching reading, incorporating technology, drama, film and media, and a diversity of textual experiences.

In its focus on the value of rich literary heritages, the range of cultural contexts shaping our teaching, and the contemporary reading practices of our students, *Teenagers and Reading* seeks to further equip teachers to enable students to thrive and succeed: not merely in mastering basic skills and testing-taking, but in 'reading and writing' their 'story' and their world – for meaning, for pleasure, for abundant purposes and for personal agency in its broadest and most lasting dimensions. If we agree with Lessing, 'it is our stories that (create) and will recreate us' and it is the teacher of English who is preeminently placed to embody and enact this vision.

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Why literature matters

Libby Gleeson

Some years ago I was contacted by a young teacher who was preparing to teach a Year Nine class my book *Love Me, Love Me Not* (Gleeson, 1998). This is a collection of love stories where the protagonists are each part of a Year Eight class. Each story has a different main character then those characters become minor characters in the other stories. Did I have any ideas on the ways I would like my book taught?

I responded with this:

> *Let me begin with what I think you shouldn't do. Please don't give the students a list of comprehension tasks to see if they have understood aspects of the book. Don't get them to look up tricky words or phrases or to count similes and metaphors. Instead think of ways to engage them with the characters and the dilemmas the book contains.*
>
> *The book is about the different stages of relationships that young people have with each other, loosely termed first love. It starts with Fran who must come to terms with herself and her thoughts, Thomas who seeks friendship, through to various characters who have crushes and romantic connection to Cathy and Rodney who are trying out a genuine first love romance.*
>
> *My first thoughts are:*
>
> *Ask your students have they ever been in any of the situations in the stories? Do they know people who have? If one of their friends was in one of these situations, what advice would they give them? Do you think any of the characters acts stupidly? Why? What should they have done? Which characters do you*

like? Dislike? If you could talk to any of these characters what would you ask them? Say to them?

The stories are in a particular order. Why do you think Fran is first and Cathy and Rodney is last?

Look at any declarations of love in the stories. Look at declarations of love in other texts – poems/popular songs/Romeo and Juliet (the play or the film), Home and Away. This latter one could lead on to all kinds of discussions about the realistic or otherwise portrayal of young love.

When I read a work of fiction I want to discuss the ideas embedded in the work, the characters, the action and the way the writer has made me feel. That usually means I look closely at the text but sometimes I don't want to talk about it at all, I merely want to enjoy the private pleasure of the reading. I believe students should be accorded the same privilege.

Story is fundamental to our lives. It may be the day-to-day telling of events in the family or the community or it may be the immersing of ourselves in narratives in written form, in theatre or in film. As an adult I read and watch stories and to an extent I measure myself against the characters and action in them.

Young children use narrative play and subsequently the experience of story to help them work out the way the world works and how they fit into it.

Barbara Hardy, former professor of English, University of London put it so well:

… we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future. (Hardy, 1978, p. 13)

Children and young people should be immersed in story, and not just any old text. 'Quality texts' is a term much used but I've yet to see a definition of the term. Here is mine. A quality text must have integrity. It must have characters that are fully realised. It must have language that fully expresses what the writer wants to say. The story must satisfy the reader but also make demands of the reader. The very best stories have something to say that goes beyond a surface meaning to something deeper, a symbolic meaning that speaks of the human condition.

Creating texts like this is not easy and yet it is what I am committed to doing in my professional life.

As each story is written I believe that there are two different processes going on. The first is creative or imaginative thinking. I need to imagine the story: the structure, the action of the plot, and the characters in all their detail. How can each element be interpreted by the reader? What images can I find that will create layers of meaning so that the most discerning reader may find levels of understanding beyond the simple surface level? I do that from my experience of life and from my own encounters with story over many years. These might be stories I've heard someone tell, stories I've read or stories I've seen as film, television or drama on stage.

At the same time, all the writing skills I've been taught or that I have learnt, including everything I know about language and grammar from more than thirty years professional experience must come into play or the richest imagining in the world will come to nothing.

Two years ago I came across a publication *Waiting for a Jamie Oliver: Beyond Bog-Standard Literacy* (Powling, 2005). Jamie Oliver took on the food that was being cooked in schools and served up to children across Great Britain. He called it pap and set about showing that you could be creative and health conscious and still deliver decent meals within budget. And he made a docu–mentary about it and hijacked the whole community along with him.

Now, in Great Britain, there are those who want the same thing to happen to the way that literature is treated in schools.

The list of contributors is a star studded one of the most successful writers for young people in England: Phillip Pullman, Michael Rosen, Anne Fine, Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Morpurgo and others. The brilliant cartoons front and back are by Quentin Blake.

What is it they are protesting about that is happening in schools? It is more money spent on testing than on books for the children. It's the emphasis on texts and text types and not on the whole story. By that they mean that bits of stories are given to students and analysed for whatever purpose and the whole book is rarely seen. It is the ranking of schools and of students according to the test scores which these authors feel is not a true measure of the understanding the student may have. And as far as writing is concerned, it is the rigorous adherence to formulae, to writing a type of text, and to a particular process in order to create it. These authors feel that there is far, far too little understanding in the schools in Britain of what