

A brave new world: Teachers' conceptions of the value of creativity in the new Stage 6 English syllabus

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ABSTRACT

A significant body of research points to the challenges faced by English teachers in balancing creative pedagogy with the demands of high-stakes testing. However, few studies have examined teachers' conceptions of the importance of creativity in the context of end-of-school examinations. This study addresses this critical gap by exploring the perspectives of secondary Australian English teachers on the value of creative learning experiences when preparing students for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in the state of New South Wales. Given the recent implementation of the new Stage 6 Syllabus, this article offers insights into the scope for creativity in the revised Standard and Advanced English courses for Year 12 students. Drawing from teacher case studies, the findings indicate that despite teachers' belief in the importance of creativity, their time for creative teaching and learning has been limited by the demands of the former HSC syllabus. Teachers feel positively, however, about the increased space for creativity within the new Stage 6 English courses. This research will be useful for teachers as they transition into teaching the new English syllabus, prompting them to reassess the scope for creative learning when preparing students for the HSC.

Introduction

Creativity is conceptualised in the *Australian Curriculum* as the generation of new ideas, solutions, possibilities and representations (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016a). Increasingly the focus of educational policy and pedagogy, it is recognised by researchers, teachers, and policymakers as one of the most important skills for twenty-first century learners, living in a complex and unpredictable world (Gibson & Ewing, 2011; Jefferson & Anderson, 2017; Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008). However, prior research has found that as teachers are increasingly pressured to prepare students for narrow and formulaic high-stakes tests such as Australia's National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), creative learning experiences in the classroom are often marginalised due to time restraints and curriculum requirements (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013).

Currently, there is a paucity of literature on teachers' conceptions of the importance of creative learning when preparing students for high-stakes end-of-school examinations. This study aims to contribute to the field by exploring the perspectives of secondary Australian teachers on the value of creativity in the context of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examinations, which are a graduation requirement in the state of New South Wales (NSW). Importantly, it offers insights into their conceptions of the scope for creativity in the new Stage 6 Syllabus for English, which was implemented for the Year 11 cohort of 2018 and will be examined for the first time in 2019 (NSW Education Standards Authority [NESA], 2018).

This study was grounded in sociocultural theory, which emphasises the impact of an individual's context on their social and mental activity (Lantolf, 2000). From this perspective, learning is understood as an ongoing internalisation of social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978) and education is an inherently 'creative process', as

students 'build their own knowledge through exploratory talk and sustained argumentation' (Sawyer, 2012, p. 396). A sociocultural understanding of teachers' work also underpinned the study, as participants' pedagogical values and practices are situated within the specific educational settings. Building on this theoretical framework, this study asked the following research questions:

1. How do teachers conceptualise and value creativity in senior English?
2. How does the high-stakes assessment environment impact creative learning in Stage 6 English for Year 11 and 12 students?
3. Where do teachers see space for creative teaching and learning in the new Stage 6 English syllabus?

Literature review: Situating creativity, pedagogy, and assessment

Prior scholarship has conceptualised *creativity* as the ability to produce work that is original and valued in a specific context (Robinson, 2009; Sternberg & Lubart, 1998). Meanwhile, researchers have used the term *creative learning* to refer to classroom activities that foster students' creativity by requiring them to ask questions, make connections, imagine alternative possibilities, and reflect critically (Craft, Cremin, Burnard & Chappell, 2007). Such pedagogy is viewed in opposition to an instructionist model of learning, which conceives of students as the passive recipients of the information transmitted to them by their teachers (Sawyer, 2015). To situate the study, we begin by reviewing prior scholarship related to how teachers value, conceptualise, and enact creativity, particularly within high-stakes assessment contexts.

The value of creativity in subject English

Defining, let alone enacting, English as a discipline has always been complex. Scholars have argued that there is a 'radical uncertainty as to the very nature' of the subject (Reid, 1982, p. 8), and have alternatively conceptualised English as 'an induction into basic literacy skills, an engagement with great works of literature, an opportunity for personal growth and for critical and cultural analysis' (Macken-Horarik, 2014, p. 9). Consequently, policymakers, teachers, and researchers may all bring different understandings to bear on what constitutes subject English, and may all hold diverse perspectives on how it should be reflected within national policy and taught within the local curriculum. Notably, these can shift over time. In the United States, for instance, Pearson (2013) argues that the era of No Child Left Behind illustrated an 'encapsulated view of reading as

an independent subject, to be taught and measured on its own terms' (p. 244) while the present Common Core State Standards primarily focus on the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge.

Of particular relevance to this study is ways in which different models of subject English value creativity. For example, in contrast to the cultural heritage model of English, where students are inducted into the great works of the literary canon by their teacher (Macken-Horarik, 2014), the personal growth model affords greater value to individual exploration and subjectivity (Tarpey, 2017). Such an approach is supported by Jefferson's (2009) case study of a metropolitan Australian high school, which revealed how a creative, group-devised theatre project involving spoken word, dance, music, and sound could enhance student engagement and stimulate deeper learning in the English classroom.

A creative, student-centred approach to teaching and learning is now endorsed by many syllabus and policy documents worldwide (Banaji, Cranmer & Perrotta, 2010; Looney, 2009). One of the major educational aims listed in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* is for students to become 'confident and creative individuals' (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9), as they generate and apply original ideas, discover new possibilities, and construct complex theories, representations, and products (ACARA, 2016b). Empirical research has revealed numerous benefits of creative learning, including deeper conceptual understanding, more positive self-concept, and higher levels of motivation, engagement, and academic success (Ewing, 2010; Martin et al., 2013; Sawyer, 2012).

Teachers' conceptions of the value of creativity in English

Through their interpretation of curriculum policies and their choice of instructional strategies, teachers largely determine the level of creativity fostered in their classrooms. Gannon (2014) conceives of creativity as 'an event, as something that happens when people engage in particular spaces and times' (p. 131), thereby crediting the teacher as the designer of creative learning experiences. Given the current movement towards more creative learning in schools, it is important to understand teachers' perspectives on this shift, and their confidence in operationalising it through their pedagogy. A meta-synthesis of 17 empirical research studies into teachers' beliefs about creativity revealed that while the majority of participant teachers deemed themselves capable of fostering students' creativity, many found the school climate, curriculum guidelines, and testing procedures to constrain their ability to do so (Andiliou & Murphy, 2010). Creativity must therefore be upheld as

an important learning goal in both the specific school and broader educational context if teachers' personal value of creative learning is to translate into pedagogical practice (Ferrari, Cachia & Punie, 2009; Frawley, 2016).

Existing scholarship points to an incongruence between the purported and actual place of creative learning in the *Australian Curriculum: English*. In a document analysis of the NSW *English Years 7–10 Syllabus* (2002) and *English Stage 6 Syllabus* (1999), Michaels (2004) concludes that acts of 'composition' in English are for the most part mechanical acts of 'production', rather than unbounded acts of 'creation', since students are constricted by the formulaic assembly of textual elements expected of them. Sawyer and Howie (2011) raise a similar concern in their critique of the new *Australian Curriculum: English for Years 7 to 10*, which they believe to privilege structural analysis over subjective response. In addition, Manuel and Brock's (2003) comparison of the junior and senior NSW English syllabuses concluded that while Stage 4 (Years 7 and 8) and Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10) students are positioned as agents, actively constructing meaning in a wide range of contexts, Stage 6 students in Years 11 and 12 are taught within a predominantly passive, analytical paradigm. However, the findings of these document analyses are now outdated, and new research needs to be done into teachers' beliefs about, and reported enactment of, creativity in the new English syllabus.

Impact of high-stakes assessment environments on creative learning in English

A significant body of research points to the challenges teachers face in finding time for creative learning amidst the demands of their educational setting, which is one of increasing standardisation and accountability (Harris, 2016; Looney, 2009). In Au's (2007) qualitative metasynthesis of 49 studies into how high-stakes testing affects the curriculum in the United States, 65% of teachers reported an increase in teacher-centred instruction due to the pressure to cover the breadth of test-required information. This compulsion to 'teach to the test' can result in the use of rote learning and individual drill and skill practice, leading to superficial understanding (Jones, 2007) and the marginalisation of creative learning experiences (Beghetto, 2005).

Currently, most literature on high-stakes testing refers to the standardised tests taken by students during primary school and the middle years of high school, such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Australia (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012), which is administered to Year

3, 5, 7, and 9 students annually. Few studies have investigated the impact of high-stakes, end-of-school examinations on teachers' pedagogy. An ethnographic study of 19 teachers from various subject areas in NSW concluded that the HSC did not inhibit best-practice teaching, as participants overwhelmingly saw their role in the classroom as challenging students rather than 'spoon-feeding' them information (Ayres, Sawyer & Dinham, 2004). However, the conclusions of this study cannot be generalised due to the small sample size and the limitation in scope to teachers of high-achieving Year 12 students. A conflicting finding resulted from a survey of 22 secondary English teachers, in which all participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the HSC examination drives the way in which senior English is taught, hence inhibiting teachers' capacity to inspire students' passion for exploring literature (Manuel & Carter, 2016). The transferability of this study is also limited, however, by its reliance on self-reported survey data and lack of case studies to provide depth and detail about the teachers' practices. If creativity is to remain a priority in students' final years of schooling, further research needs to be conducted into teachers' conceptions of the value of creative learning when preparing students for high-stakes examinations like the HSC.

Methodology

Research design

An important consideration for research of this kind is the problematic nature of accessing teachers' thinking, or 'craft knowledge'. Since the study's research questions focus on both teachers' conceptualisation and enactment of creativity in senior English, our research design needed to capture their beliefs as well as their practices. Through the collection of multiple data sources, including interviews and instructional artefacts, teachers' conceptions of the value of creativity were analysed alongside evidence of their design and implementation of creative learning in Stage 6 English classrooms.

Research context

This study involved secondary English teachers from a representative range of government and independent high schools in the Australian state of New South Wales. The credential awarded for the final two years of schooling in NSW is known as the Higher School Certificate (HSC), which is an equal combination of a student's school-based assessment mark in Year 12 and an external examination mark (NESA, 2015). Students' raw HSC marks from all Year 12 subjects are

then scaled into a single ranking called the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), which determines their entry into a particular university and course (University Admissions Centre, 2017). Given the highly competitive nature of university entrance, and the importance of external examinations to final grades, Year 12 students in NSW are hence taught in a high-stakes assessment environment (Ayres et al., 2004).

English is currently the only compulsory course for study in the HSC, taken by approximately 60,000 students annually (NESA, 2016), and at least English must count towards a student's ATAR. The *Stage 6 Syllabus*, taught in Year 11 and Year 12, underwent major review in 2014, and new syllabuses for each of the courses were drafted and publicly consulted in 2015 (English Teachers Association [ETA] NSW, 2016; NESA, 2017a, 2017b). For the Standard and Advanced English courses, which are the focus of this study, there was wide support for including multimodal and digital texts, making a stronger link between creative and critical content, and reducing the number of texts studied to make the content requirements more manageable (NESA, 2017a, 2017b). The purpose of the *Stage 6 Syllabus* was rephrased from, '[fostering] the intellectual, social and moral development of students' (Board of Studies NSW, 2009, p. 5), to '[fostering] the intellectual, creative, ethical and social development of students' (NESA, 2017c, p. 1), thereby placing – at least semantically – a greater emphasis on creativity in the new syllabus.

Participants

Participants were recruited for the study through the posting of a link via Twitter, using the popular hashtag #ozengchat, and in the English Teachers Association NSW Facebook group, which has almost 5,000 active members from schools all over NSW. Thirty teachers indicated interest in the study and affirmed that they were currently teaching at least one HSC English class, or had taught the HSC course within the past two years. Five teachers were then selected as a representative sample, based on their variation in geographic location, years of teaching experience, and the type of school in which they teach (see Table 1), hence enhancing the trustworthiness of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Data collection

This study involved the collection of multiple data sources. Five purposefully-selected teachers were conceptualised as representative case studies, in order to generate the detail, richness, and within-case variance needed to understand the issue in any degree of thoroughness (Flyvbjerg, 2011), and 'to reach areas

of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible, such as people's subjective experiences and attitudes' (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2011, p. 529). The questions were open-ended to allow the teachers to share information that the researcher may not have anticipated (Merriam, 2009), while the semi-structured interview format, with its flexible wording and question order, respected the unique worldview of each individual respondent (Patton, 2015). All interviews were audio recorded and personally transcribed by the researcher. Member checks then gave participants a chance to review the collected data and verify the emerging theories (Janesick, 2000), hence bolstering the study's credibility (Shenton, 2004).

Since teacher beliefs do not necessarily translate into pedagogical practices (Ayres et al., 2004), case study teachers were also asked to provide at least one artefact, such as a unit program, lesson plan, or assessment notification, to demonstrate their enactment of creative learning in the *Stage 6 Syllabus*. Patton (2015) argues for the usefulness of such documents as an authentic, ready-made source of information for researchers, which can facilitate the triangulation of data and verification of participants' self-reported beliefs and practices. We used these artefacts as stimuli during the interviews, asking questions such as: For whom and for what purpose was this lesson plan or assessment task developed? Did you have agency in creating and implementing it? How did this lesson plan/assessment task allow for creativity with pedagogy and/or student learning? How did students respond to the lesson/assessment task? How was the lesson/assessment task beneficial to students' learning in senior English? By using the artefact in this way, we were encouraged teachers to consider how their values and beliefs about creativity were reflected in, or absent from, their pedagogy.

Data analysis

Because we were interested in exploring how English teachers conceptualised and enacted creativity in the classroom, and how this was shaped by the high-stakes assessment context of the New South Wales Stage 6 curriculum, our research questions guided our iterative approach to data analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The data collected throughout the study was primarily analysed through an inductive process of thematic analysis, which allowed salient themes to emerge naturally (Saldaña, 2009). Throughout the analysis process, we wrote analytic memos to allow us to document and reflect upon the coding process, including how codes emerged, combined, and splintered, as well as how themes and concepts emerged from the data and shed light on

Table 1. Teacher participant profiles

Name*	Years teaching	Type of school teaching in	Role within school	Perspective on the value of creativity in the high-stakes testing context
Tom	13	Co-educational government high school in urban Sydney	Former Head Teacher of English. Currently a Principal Research Officer for the NSW Department of Education	'I realised that ... even though the end product for students was an analytical piece, they could still use [creative learning experiences] to engage with a text and with the ideas, and often got more from it as a result.'
Sarah	8	Independent, all-girls high school in urban Sydney	Senior English teacher	'If you haven't rote learned something, you need to think creatively in order to rejig your thesis and perhaps use other words or aspects of a text in order to answer it, so being able to manipulate your knowledge is quite creative.'
Georgia	10	Independent, co-educational K-12 Steiner school in urban Sydney	Senior English teacher	'Because they've had to look at texts from really different perspectives, and they've been able to play with the texts in a visual or an auditory form ... they're engaged with the content and they've made the content their own.'
Kelly	15	Co-educational government high school in an urban area of the Southern Highlands, 110km from Sydney	Head Teacher of English	'The ATAR is a waste of time ... so there's no point in getting stressed about the HSC. You may as well have fun and be creative.'
Saskia	14	Co-educational government high school in an urban area of the Southern Highlands, 110km from Sydney	Head Teacher of English	'If [your approach] is 'teach them this concept, give them every opportunity ... to grasp this concept' and then 'here's a question in the exam about this concept', I feel like the connections are easier.'

* All names used in this study are pseudonyms

the scope for creative learning within senior English.

The interviews and artefacts were analysed thematically using first-cycle and second-cycle coding methods. During the first cycle, the interview transcripts and artefacts were examined line by line, and meaningful fragments were labelled with *descriptive codes*, such as 'time constraints of the HSC'. Some *in vivo codes* were also used to understand the teachers' perspectives through their own language; for instance, 'a brave new world' encapsulated one teacher's feelings about the new HSC English syllabus. The latter approach was particularly salient for this study, as teachers' creative uses of idioms and metaphors provided insight into their beliefs and practices.

During the second cycle of coding, patterns were identified across the data sources, and the number of codes was reduced and condensed (Saldaña, 2009). Data was categorised into one of the following codes: identifying pedagogical influences; experiencing the impact of high-stakes testing; valuing creativity; facilitating creativity; assessing creativity; and understanding creativity

in the new syllabus. Reflecting on our research questions, we were able to distil our original descriptive codes and *in vivo* codes into one of these six broader codes which provided insight into how English teachers are grappling with how they value and teach creativity in a high-stakes assessment environment.

Findings and discussion

This study offers several key findings about teachers' conceptions of the value of creative learning in HSC English. In line with existing literature, the majority of participants articulated their belief in the value of creativity for students' learning and success in HSC English, yet many teachers expressed the difficulty of finding time for creative learning in the context of high-stakes examinations, due to the amount of content to be covered and resulting time constraints. Importantly, there was a general sense of positivity about the increased scope for creative pedagogy in the new *Stage 6 Syllabus*, which was studied by the first Year 11 cohort in 2018.

'A More Logical Connection to Learning': Teachers' conceptions of the value of creativity in Senior English

Teacher participants overwhelmingly expressed their belief in the value of creativity in senior English; particularly within HSC English courses, creativity was highlighted as a way to make connections. Saskia feels that when they are given the opportunity to grasp a concept in whatever way makes sense to them – whether that be visual, aural, or kinaesthetic – students are able to make 'a more logical connection' back to this learning and apply their knowledge in a new context, such as an unseen exam question. Georgia agrees that when her students are provided the opportunity to 'play' with their HSC English texts in a visual or auditory way, they are much more likely to make the content their own, rather than just regurgitating the information transmitted to them by their teacher and quickly forgetting it: 'When they draw it, they move it with their bodies by doing songs, poems, dances, they take it into all aspects of their bodies ... it speaks to them on a more human level'. Kelly found this to be the case when she used a visualisation exercise to deepen students' understanding of Tim Winton's novel *Blueback* in the new Year 11 Reading to Write module. Having made her class 'recall a time when they were immersed in water' and 'free write about this experience' in a sensory way, Kelly found that this greatly improved students' critical analysis of Winton's own literary style.

Similarly, Tom realised that he could use creative writing not only in the Area of Study, but also throughout the other modules, to enhance students' engagement and understanding of the texts and help them develop stronger analytical responses. He said this was particularly effective when teaching Wilfred Owen's war poems in the former Module B: Close Study of Text: 'Even though creative writing is not assessed in this module, the aim was to get students to experiment more closely with the kind of language that Wilfred Owen uses'. His Standard English class of 'low-skill, low-efficacy learners' was quickly bored by standard poetry annotation, technique tables and paragraph writing, so he tried to engage them with creative activities, such as getting them 'to compose a short creative piece that explores the sensory experiences felt by a soldier in a trench before World War I'. Tom believes this more creative approach to teaching the module enhanced his students' ability to subsequently analyse the deliberate linguistic choices made by Owen, helping them to improve their 'descriptive D' responses to C-range essays by the HSC.

Teachers therefore corroborated the beliefs of leading pedagogues that in comparison to the superficial

learning that occurs through instructionism, creative learning experiences generate a deeper conceptual understanding, allowing students to transfer knowledge to new situations and engage in higher-order, innovative thinking (Gibson & Ewing, 2011; Jefferson & Anderson, 2017; Sawyer, 2012).

'Hot-housing for the HSC': The impact of high-stakes testing on teachers' pedagogy

Despite teachers' belief in the importance of fostering creativity in their students, many said it was difficult to prioritise creative learning and risk taking in the senior English courses. This aligns with prior studies, which have revealed both students' fear of divergent thinking (Banaji et al., 2010) and teachers' tendency to short-circuit their students' creative expression in high-stakes examination contexts (Beghetto, 2005). When this is the case, education risks becoming a 'game where teachers teach the art of passing exams, and pupils realise the academic dangers of nonconformity' (Maisuria, 2005, p. 141), thereby jeopardising the stated aim of the *Stage 6 Syllabus*, for students 'to become innovative, active, independent learners' and 'develop their critical and imaginative faculties' (NESA, 2017c, p. 6).

The five case study teachers offered a nuanced understanding of the influence of high-stakes testing on the pedagogy and highlighted the multiple tensions around creative learning in senior English. Tom admitted that his teaching was quite heavily dictated by the demands of the HSC early on in his career, when he tended to backward map from the final exam to ensure that he was giving students the 'tick box' of skills required to do well. However, as he gained experience and confidence in teaching Stage 6 English, Tom said he realised there was still scope for creative learning experiences amidst the test preparation, such as role play and imaginative writing: 'You could still have really creative learning experiences even though the end product for students was an analytical piece. That might be more fun and effective anyway'.

Kelly and Saskia, both Head English teachers at co-educational government high schools, were adamant that the HSC need not compromise creative learning in Stage 6 English. Kelly outright denied the influence of the high-stakes testing context on her pedagogy, stating, 'My principal doesn't support that "teach to the test" crap. It's not a culture at our school at all'. She believes it is much more important to equip students with lifelong skills such as creativity than to make them stress about their HSC exams, since the ATAR is just one pathway to a career. Similarly, Saskia said a significant number of the students at her school do not aspire to complete Year 12 let alone pursue tertiary study.

Rather than subscribing to the 'prepare them for the industry' model of teaching, Saskia believes her job as an English teacher is to help students fall in love with the texts they study and appreciate how much they can enrich their lives, which she does not believe you do by 'hot-housing them to write essays'.

Evidently, there is a relationship between a school's culture and demographics, and the extent to which teachers' pedagogy is impacted by high-stakes testing. Sarah teaches in an all-girls independent school in an affluent area of Sydney, where she said most of the students' parents want their children to become doctors or lawyers rather than 'bohemian artists'. The students themselves are extremely motivated to excel in their final examinations, and the school generally places in the top 20 for English in the HSC. While Sarah said her pedagogy is inevitably influenced by the demands of the HSC, she does not believe that creative learning is compromised by the high-stakes assessment context. The 'high academic standards' and level of 'community support' at Sarah's school enable her to 'push more', teaching rich and conceptually-based units which equip students with not only the content knowledge required for the HSC examinations, but also the skill set to be highly creative and conceptual individuals. She said that it was much harder to do this, however, at the government school in western Sydney where she began her teaching career, as she felt that the combination of a lower socio-economic demographic, more students learning English as an additional language, and more behavioural management issues left her less space in the curriculum for creative learning.

Georgia has also found it difficult to balance creativity with the heavy content requirements and assessment regime of the former HSC, despite working at a Steiner school whose educational philosophy affords great value to creative expression and immersive learning. She said that the pace of teaching demanded by the NSW English curriculum has limited her capacity to allow students to be genuinely creative in the senior years, and that many Year 12 students just want to be spoon-fed the information they need to 'jump through the hoops'. Georgia described her disillusionment upon taking her HSC class to an English study day last year, where a student who received one of the highest scores in the state admitted that she had learned her creative writing piece by heart so that she had more time to write her essay. Georgia shared:

We're not supposed to be making them rote learn [essays]. They're supposed to be able to think off the top of their head, but having marked HSC creative writing, the ones that are really good are by kids that have seriously prepared a piece of work and been able to adapt it to the question.

Like previous research, we found the HSC examination to be a major determinant of teacher pedagogy in senior English (Gannon, 2014; Manuel & Carter, 2016).

'Brave new world of the Stage 6 Syllabus': Where teachers see space for creativity in the new HSC curriculum

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study was the general sense of positivity shared by teachers about the increased scope for creative teaching and learning in the new *Stage 6 Syllabus*, which was implemented for the first Year 11 cohort in 2018 and will be examined for the first time in 2019. The importance of creativity is clearly inscribed in its rationale, which states that students will 'develop their critical and imaginative faculties', whilst becoming 'innovative, active, independent learners' and 'creative and confident users of a range of digital technologies' (NESA, 2017c, p. 6). A key difference between the old and new HSC English syllabus is the stipulation that the new Year 11 and the Year 12 formal school-based assessment programs can only include one 'formal written examination', whilst 'one task must be a multimodal presentation enabling students to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills across a range of modes' (NESA, 2018, p. 6). The addition of the multimodal task requirement potentially offers space for senior English students to engage in creative learning even within the context of high-stakes assessment.

Sarah said she gave 'deliberately vague' instructions to her Advanced English class for their multimodal assessment task – to create a 'four-minute audio-visual presentation of [their] interpretation of McEwan's *Atonement*' – in order to encourage students to be creative and original in articulating their thesis: 'To get an A, it really must be ambitious. There must be a risk taken in their work'. Georgia also encouraged her students to think outside the box in the multimodal assessment task she developed for the new Year 11 module Narratives that Shape our World, getting her Advanced English class to pretend that they were online journalists '[contributing] an article and video that examines how the narrative voice of a text is often not transparent'. The assessment notification offered no particular directives for the video component, other than for students to 'appear in [their] video, either visually or audibly' and to 'be creative in how [they] present [their] analysis'. This aligns with Jewitt's (2008) finding that while traditional models for print literacy are 'based on the acquisition and mastery of sets of established practices, conventions, and rules', multimodal forms encourage students to question dominant notions

of literacy and associated ideologies, and to 'explore the production of innovation and change' (p. 252). However, Curwood (2012) argues that teachers often apply a paradigm of assessment rooted in print-based culture to multimodal texts, which may fail to capture students' content learning and meaning-making processes that draw on diverse semiotic resources and involve multiple modes of representation.

NESA's new requirement for a multimodal assessment task appears to have pushed teachers to be much more experimental in the design of their assessment programs. Saskia's English faculty facilitated a two-day 'murder mystery' incursion for the Year 11 Standard module Contemporary Possibilities and the Advanced module Narratives that Shape our World, whereby students worked in groups to collect and analyse evidence around the school, before presenting their findings in their choice of presentation (e.g., a recording or a live performance). Saskia said that so far, the feedback from her Year 11 students about the new modules has been overwhelmingly positive, and that they understand the purpose of their learning activities:

I think we're in a brave new world ... it's not all about whether they can memorise and deliver an essay at the end of two years' work. We don't know what next year's HSC exam will look like and some teachers find that terrifying, but I find that exciting because that's authentic assessment.

Both Kelly and Sarah expressed the opinion that it will be much more difficult to rote learn essays in the new HSC examination since it is less centred on techniques and more so on students' ideas and ability to convey meaning. In particular, the Reading to Write module in Year 11, and the Year 12 equivalent, Module C: The Craft of Writing, were identified by all of the case study teachers as inherently creative modules, and impossible to pre-prepare material for. Throughout these units, students both 'evaluate how writers use language creatively and imaginatively for a range of purposes' and 'strengthen their own skills in producing highly crafted imaginative, discursive, persuasive, and informative texts' (NESA, 2017c, p. 52). Kelly's English faculty has chosen to disperse the Reading to Write and The Craft of Writing content amongst the other modules to ensure that creative writing remains a constant and valued practice for senior English students throughout their final year of study.

While the case study teachers have clearly embraced the new *Stage 6 Syllabus* as a positive change, a number of key pedagogues have raised concerns. In their response to the draft Stage 6 syllabuses, the English Teachers Association NSW (2016) predicted that The Craft of Writing module 'will evaporate under

the pressure of school life' (p. 7) – subsumed into the other modules – and that creative composition could be neglected since there is 'no assessment of creative writing in the external examination' (p. 17). In an opinion article in *The Conversation*, Manuel (2017) expressed her belief that Year 11 and 12 students in NSW would now be studying 'a potentially less rigorous curriculum', due to the reduction of texts and the option to not study a novel or poetry in Year 12. Saskia, who was involved with the design of the new syllabus, said that at the NSW Teachers Federation conference this year, there were also some 'big players in the world of English' expressing their view that the new *Stage 6 Syllabus* is 'dumbing English down'. Saskia rather maintains that the reduction in texts and assessments will allow teachers to slow down and offer students a wider and more creative range of ways to connect to their texts: 'It's not dumbed down. It's just different'.

Moving creative learning forward

If schools are to prepare students to navigate and thrive in the challenging and unpredictable world in which we live, we must transform the education system from a predominantly test-driven, transmission model of learning to a stimulating and dynamic environment which fosters creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking (Ewing, 2010; Jefferson & Anderson, 2017). While the value of creativity is enshrined in contemporary educational discourse, policy, and syllabus documents (ACARA, 2016b; MCEETYA, 2008; NESA, 2017c), prior research has revealed how creative learning can be marginalised in the context of high-stakes testing due to the time constraints, curriculum demands, and formulaic nature of standardised assessments (Au, 2007; Banaji et al., 2010; Looney, 2009). Even English teachers, whose subject is 'inherently creative' (Gannon, 2014, p. 134), have admitted to sacrificing creative learning when preparing students for high-stakes examinations, to ensure adequate time for analytical work (Frawley, 2016; Manuel & Carter, 2016).

The drafting and implementation of a new *Stage 6 Syllabus* in NSW has invited a welcome reassessment of the importance of creativity in students' final years of secondary English. This study investigated teachers' conceptions of the place of creative learning in the context of the HSC, a high-stakes, end-of-school examination. Since its small sample size was a limitation to its generalisability, the study aimed to make a rich and nuanced contribution to research on creativity in the English curriculum (Patton, 2015; Shenton, 2004). We argue that disparate approaches and evident tensions within subject English, particularly as teachers

transition into the 'brave new world' of a new curriculum, have significant implications for both pedagogy and policy. Consequently, teachers must engage in ongoing sense-making in order to appraise, interpret, and enact the *Stage 6 Syllabus* in Year 11 and Year 12 English classrooms. According to Ewing and Gibson (2015), teachers need to acknowledge and question their professional identities and pedagogies in order to feel 'empowered to change transmissive and traditional educational practices that often exist' (p. 77). If teachers are encouraged to reconsider the place of creative learning within their own pedagogical practices, perhaps senior English classrooms can become a richer playground for teaching and learning.

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