The Postmodern Classroom: Inhabiting the 'Extra-territorial' Space

Jane Fernandez
Faculty of Arts, Avondale College, Cooranbong, NSW

> No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness. If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind. (Gibran, *The Prophet*, p. 51)

As educators, we provide opportunities for our students to discover themselves. Yet, as we know it today, the self is an unstable category, a tenuous, unknowable entity. The shift away from a pure notion of self suggests that the new 'subject' is elusive, if not indecipherable.

What implications does this have for the postmodern classroom? The experience of dispersion, exile, broken homes has turned the classroom into a global village. Borrowing Said's definition of 'extraterritoriality – the state of being neither here nor there, but rather in-between things' (Noss and Pachler 1999, p. 99), I wish to suggest that the postmodern classroom is challenged by this aura of extraterritoriality. To begin, knowledge is no longer the teacher's prerogative. It is accessible at the click of a mouse in schools, libraries and more importantly from within the private sanctum of the common living room. Students have within their reach a range of resources for broadening their scope of knowledge, independent of their teachers. Accordingly, Richard Noss and Norbert Pachler's point that the emergence of new technologies has corresponding responsibilities is pertinent. Noss and Pachler qualify the 'need to address – as an urgent policy issue- what kinds of new *knowledge* is made accessible by the technology, and how these fit with the needs of the citizens of the twenty-first century' (Noss and Pachler 1999, p. 195). Further, they suggest 'that while new technologies might diminish certain aspects of the teacher's role, such as the collation of material and information,' the teacher's role is redefined to facilitate and extend the learning process. In this regard, they cite Bruner in determining that 'a key role' for teachers lies 'in providing "scaffolding" i.e. mediating support in the process of acquiring new skills, knowledge or understanding' (Bruner, cited in Noss and Pachler 1999, p. 206). Accordingly, it would seem appropriate to adopt more 'open styles', and 'constructivist' approaches to teaching/learning. In this regard, Brooks and Brooks (1999, p. 102) suggest that 'becoming a teacher who helps students to search rather than follow' can be 'challenging and, in

many ways, frightening'. Yet as overwhelming as this may be, it appears that the future of classroom practice is anticipated in teaching practice that involves teachers as 'mediators of students and environments, not simply as givers of information and managers of behaviour' (Brooks and Brooks 1999, p. 102).

Mediating involves facilitating, supporting, seeking out alternatives and considering new possibilities. In essence, it means inhabiting the 'extra-territorial' space. Inhabiting this space means being at home with the unfamiliar, reconfiguring the old, inventing and reinventing the self to meet the demands of a new world. It means converting vulnerable moments into opportunities for testing and discovering. There is much to be gained by risking old and safe methods of inquiry. The shift is plausible in the measure in which teachers reorientate themselves in a changing world. Inhabiting the 'extra-territorial' space means testing and re-imaging the borders of the classroom to embrace the margins of a varied and complex world. By absorbing this in-betweenness, the teaching/learning process can be personally edifying as we extend ourselves beyond the local and allow ourselves to be enriched by cultural and global exchange.

The benefits of technology are evident for both teachers and students in the wide range of software available today. Teachers have access to planning, assessing, teaching and reporting tools while students have access to organisers, tutorials, worksheets, graphics, multi-media, video and publishing software, to name a few. Virtual educational tools make it possible to conduct and grade assessments on-line as well as to encourage collaborative learning and sharing of information. With the advantages provided by technology the general format of classrooms can become more flexible to enable students to experience a wide variety of learning environments, simulate a wide range of workplace profiles and situations, as well as increase their awareness of and commitment to community-based objectives and values. Classrooms could be organised as collaborative workshops, where teachers feature specific projects aimed at motivating students towards creating personal and group portfolios with the desired outcomes of the syllabus in mind. In the creation of these portfolios, the use of teacher-directed support material and scaffolding techniques enables teachers to provide meaningful support without compromising students' abilities, initiatives and desired work practices. As students gain more confidence and develop specialised skills, teachers can adjust their roles to that of advisors, motivators and moderators. Book clubs, reading circles, seminars, mini-symposiums could substitute for customary teacher-centred activities. The focus on publishing essays and projects for circulation within schools as well as the wider community will enhance students' learning processes while preparing students for communication and management roles. Classrooms as mini-publishing houses enable students to familiarise themselves with the potential and responsibilities of shared learning as well as provide the opportunity for students to participate in the marketing and promotion of knowledge/ideas. Further, community needs can be integrated into research projects so that schools become active agents in the life of the local communities.

The role of the internet is particularly significant in the scope it provides as a research tool. It would be useful here to consider how this resource can help fulfil the demands of HSC English. The wide range of information, text types, publishing databases, stimulus material, chat groups, internet communities and hyperlinks make possible a dynamic, engaging and fulfilling process of personal and interactive learning for the teacher/student. This is already evident by the wide use of the internet by students and teachers to investigate suitable texts in extending work covered in the classroom or in discovering and/or creating supplementary texts for the Area of Study. The currency of the internet sources enables students to measure responses to texts through any time-line they may choose to create or define. For instance, current reviews of plays in comparison to earlier and older reviews enable students to understand text as a dynamic, thriving, evolving product that is co-produced by the author and his/her readership/audience. The analysis of how texts change and are constructed in the spaces created through the values, interests, concerns of society at a given period can be measured against how texts predict, and anticipate shifts in intellectual thought and moral positioning. Through scaffolding exercises, students can be directed to research the performance history of plays, track the ways in which drama has evolved, investigate staging methods, locate interviews with directors, actors/actresses, set designers, lighting technicians, etc. Through investigating each of these elements and their related links, students discover and become familiar with a range of text-types and work profiles fundamental to the objectives of their syllabus.

The New South Wales HSC Syllabus prescribes an Area of Study common for both the Standard and Advanced English courses. For 2005, the prescribed area

is 'The Journey'. Students focus on either physical journeys, imaginative journeys, or inner journeys. The Area of Study requires in-depth study of specific prescribed texts supplemented by texts chosen by students from their wider reading. Clearly, this HSC Area of Study anticipates the use of the internet for supplementary material through its focus on 'journeys'.

With the right motivation and a little imagination, there is no limit to what students can do with the inexhaustible range of texts and stimulus material available through the internet for the Area of Study. In this regard, a useful on-line tool is the blog.[1] Teachers can use blogs to direct students to compulsory reading materials, while students can be expected to publish their responses in the form of a blog. The advantage of the blog besides its obvious on-line character lies in its versatility and its capacity for creating links. Materials that teachers/students find useful can be referenced within the blog, thus providing readers with quick and easy access to relevant documents and texts pertinent to the study. Students can be encouraged to use an annotated bibliography to demonstrate the usefulness of the materials they have appropriated. A further advantage enables teachers to monitor students' progress and development as well as their discipline and work practices. Teachers can monitor students' work and work habits by visiting the relevant blogs at regular intervals. Blogs allow for teacher feedback on each visit allowing students to edit their work accordingly. Similarly, parents can also be given the opportunity to view and assess their child's work, while at the same time gather some understanding of the targeted teaching/learning objectives.

In the study of Shakespearean texts, a researched understanding of Renaissance philosophies and attitudes is readily available on-line. While it is possible to locate identical readings from monographs and other paper sources, the ability to locate widely ranging sources through the virtual library from sitting at a desk cannot be understated. In this regard, the value the internet provides for the study of core literary texts is not to be minimised. To provide quick access to required readings, teachers can create their personal blogs providing instructions and links to required reading. These can also be retrieved for individual and group-based classroom activity for directing and extending the study of specific texts. For instance, *King Lear*, written and performed first for James I, invites us to position it, among other things, as a political text. Links to Renaissance sites provide useful material on Renaissance philosophies, such as the Elizabethan 'Great Chain of Being'.[2] Links to history sites make James I's speeches to Parliament available, as well as background reading on the reign of James I. Of his speeches, that of March 1609 to Parliament on 'The State of Monarchie'[3] is significant. Using this material, students can be encouraged to explore the appeal of *King Lear* contextually and historically. The significance of the reign of James I, its political climate, and James' interest in uniting England and Scotland provide a stimulating background for studying *King Lear*, a play whose tragic proportions are sourced in a king's impulsive and rash decision to divide his kingdom at his will and for his pleasure. While appearing to compliment James I on his ambitions for England and Scotland, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare takes the opportunity to deal with a more crucial theme involving the role and responsibilities of the father-king to his state. From the writings of James I and his speeches to the English Parliament, James' convictions about the 'divine right of kings', his belief in the king's role as 'the politique father of his people' and the 'head of [the] microcosm of the body of man' is clearly evident. However, what is also evident in this speech is how this belief that kings are akin to 'gods' is in tension with his awareness that they must 'die like men' ('A Speech to … Parliament … 1609'). Interestingly, it is this tension that is treated in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and eventually resolved through Lear's acceptance of his mortality: his understanding that he too must 'die like men'. Measuring Shakespeare's play against the historical understanding of James I's attitude to the 'divine right of kings' intensifies the play's cathartic energy. The poignancy of the closing scene of the play cannot be denied. We are confronted with the anguished king in the throes of death touched by some epiphanic awareness symbolised in Lear's last words 'Look there, look there!' (Act 5, Scene 3). These words measure profoundly, and overtake the pathos the play evokes to collapse the boundaries of the stage world and draw in the real world. This is only one example of how internet sources can be used to direct students in qualifying and extending the critical study of texts.

Links to specific quotes in the on-line version of *King Lear* can help students perceive quickly the relationship between the play and its historical setting. Other significant links include those to feminist theory sources for Shakespeare's *King Lear* and revisionings of *King Lear*. Several literary theory websites provide extensive material on feminist theories, and students can be

directed to use these as background material to consider how/why the women in *King Lear* are flat characters. The demonising of Goneril and Regan and the piety and virtue of Cordelia have ironically no discriminatory value, as all the women in the play meet the same fate: death. This approach provides scope for students to explore feminist readings of the play and examine Renaissance attitudes to women. By directing students to appropriate resources, teachers can economise on information retrieval and dispensation, to generate instead more productive and creative learning activities in the classroom.

From the transformation of plays available on-line, of particular interest is Nahum Tate's *A History of King Lear (1681)*, as well as Shakespeare's probable source *The True Chronicle History of King Leir… .*[4] A comparison of the plays will reveal that Tate duplicated, while Shakespeare distanced himself from the romantic spirit of the primary source. While Shakespeare scaled up the tragic proportions of his play, Tate reduced it, primarily through his reluctance to 'kill off' his king. Tate's Lear is allowed to redress the error that proved fatal for Shakespeare's Lear. Shakespeare alone defies convention and mounts onto his stage a king stripped of his royal privileges, burdened with the knowledge and suffering of the heath: a remodelled champion, whose last great gesture is to give himself painfully and heroically to death. However, the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar in Tate's version acknowledges what Shakespeare's play leaves unsaid, that a radically new social order must be mounted to replace the old that has died out. In this sense, Shakespeare's play points ahead to the political disillusionment of a nation on the verge of rebellion against an old and outmoded social hierarchy. In its English context, it 'presents the demise of a particular notion of sovereignty not by staging direct political opposition but by representing the monarch's own disillusionment' (Salkeld 1993, p. 99). In this sense, Shakespeare's caution against monarchical abuse of power and his anticipation of a people's government is met to some extent in Tate's *A History of King Lear*. Also of interest is the disquiet evoked by Cordelia's death among Shakespeare's contemporary critics, which explains Tate's rewriting of the role of Cordelia.

If the gothic strain of Shakespeare's play seemed unpalatable to the 17th and 18th century audiences, interestingly it anticipated the mood and dramatic appeal of our times. A comparison with Bond's *Lear* (1972) will show how Bond creates a Lear that is far more tyrannical and pathological than Shakespeare's, in line with the pessimism of the twentieth century. Bond's Lear, obsessed with the fear of sabotage and treason, kills his subjects rashly and impulsively. Shakespeare's projected 'Scythian barbarian' comes to life in Bond's version. Just as Bond increases the cruelty of his title-character, so too does he increase his suffering by transferring Shakespeare's blinding of Gloucester to his Lear creation. Through these comparisons, students can be encouraged to analyse and synthesise material that may lead them to making more productive and engaging evaluations of the set text. In summary, these materials open up Shakespeare's text for critical inquiry by suggesting that a text is not a closed world, and that its concealed politics and hidden nuances can often be revealed through an investigation of not just the socio-political, cultural and literary milieu of the period in which it was created, but also in its continuing influence over subsequent periods.

To return to the Area of Study, the study of *The Tempest* can be facilitated through on-line research on the loss of the Sea Venture of 1609 and its re-appearance in 1610.[5] Some directive on postcolonial theory websites would also be useful to students. Links to Montaigne's essay 'On Cannibals', as well as ideas about colonisation help shape the study of this text.[6] Texts such as *The Tempest, A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (Graff and Phelean 2000) direct teachers/students to useful source material. Yet some of these sources are readily available on-line and can be blogged for classroom use. Some understanding of empire-building and the way in which knowledge/language is engineered for political purposes would be useful background to *The Tempest*. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (1978), in which he argues that the west has contrived to create, present and exploit the image of the east as 'exotic' and 'peculiar' so as to engineer and preserve its status as 'superior', 'civilised' and progressive, would be helpful in investigating the role of Prospero and his attitude to Caliban. Although Said's theory has been criticised for its generalisation of the 'west' and the 'east', it is still valuable in opening up a dialogue to explain and qualify the typical unequal power relations between master and slave as evident in *The Tempest*.[7] Prospero's attempts to cultivate, educate and 'civilise' Caliban can be critiqued more thoroughly by applying this theory.[8]

Further, the psychology of fear-inducing mechanisms: threats, pain, torture and sensationalism, is important in critiquing Prospero's use of magic and

power. What the internet provides is the means to link Prospero's control over the island with the means to compare current political trends, pertinently, in this case, in relation to Iraq. A critique of Caliban can be extended by researching our own attitudes to people and situations we fear, especially in relation to 'terrorism'. Issues regarding the meaning of space, territory, history, possession, language, religion, identity and culture as fixed concepts can be challenged through such a journey. The excesses of magic and art as symbols of knowledge and power can be critiqued against the realities of enforced servitude and human suffering. The appeal for moderation, understanding and sympathy can be applied through the focus on the students' explorations of 'journeys'.

Through scaffolding exercises students can be directed in their 'journey' towards an understanding of labels, language, imagination, symbols and concepts to ascertain how these contribute towards an understanding of ourselves and our world. In the Area of Study, the concept of the tempest can be compared to the tsunami disasters. While the tsunami made international headlines for several weeks through various forms of media, the day-to-day struggle of victims as they attempt to rebuild their lives is largely available today only through the internet. HSC students focusing on the theme of 'Journeys' have quick and easy access to materials that enable them to assess attitudes to real and tragic issues around the globe. Questions on how the tsunami changed Australia and Australian attitudes help convey how journeys are significantly different for individuals. Only through the internet are students able to access alternative stories to those run by the dominant media brokers. Contact with people and classrooms across the globe make it possible to locate and distinguish between original/local voices and consumer-directed stories. Journeying into the margins to retrieve alternative and first-hand narratives enables students to moderate media claims and bias as part of their own journeys. Such considerations as accuracy of information, the role of the sponsor, the attitudes of producers and the role that consumers play in the dissemination of information become more evident.

Fundamentally, the use of technology in classrooms has made it viable for classrooms around the globe to be linked. Cultural exchange is now possible not only through teacher-directed learning or viewing, but through student initiatives to connect with real people around the globe and compare thoughts/ideas about texts and the world. Assessment tasks can be set with this advantage in mind. Students can be encouraged to form on-line communities with specific goals in mind, and with the student initiator as moderator. Teachers can enforce accountability by setting clear outcomes, demanding strict profile guidelines for target members, and limiting the size of the community. As an end objective, the student moderator can use feedback from the on-line community to create a report on a significant issue. Alternatively, the on-line community can be formed with the purpose of creating a web-site, a database, or a blog with specific goals set by the teacher. Students can be encouraged to model a Wikipidea-type encyclopaedia for their Area of Study documenting terms, ideas, concepts they have developed in the course of their study.[9]

In summary, teaching is a complex activity involving a multitude of intersecting talents, principles and practices. The classroom is a place of experiment, discovery and surprises. The unmappable energy of a vibrant classroom is characterised today by a constantly evolving learning environment made possible through the benefits of technology. The teacher in a postmodern world is invited to rewrite his/her role against this legacy of flux. Teachers as facilitators stand at the intersection of an old/new world, a world on the threshold of implicit potential and possibilities, the 'extra-territorial' space: the space in-between things. No longer the sole custodian of knowledge sharing, the teacher is freed to become part of the experience of learning, developing, extending, his/her own experience of life with the student's evolving sense of self. In this sense, teachers and students meet and work as co-partners in an ever-widening field of inquiry. We are cautioned against the compulsion to tell a story too quickly or too neatly, at the risk of aborting the student's right and privilege to define his/her world. Ideas, theories, narratives compete today in an increasingly complex arena of diverse scholarship. Knowledge is processed, interrogated, decentred through the intersecting voices of scholars from varying disciplines. Issues of violence, war, race, gender and politics cut across and reopen established fields of inquiry to postmodern scrutiny. And we, as teachers, should welcome this scrutiny with passion and vigour, even as the answers we find return us more often than not, to that disquiet space of 'extra-territoriality': the in-between space, the space between knowing and not knowing. For those who may be discouraged by this ambivalent space, it may be good to consider that resting between alternatives may be just what we need in a world that has suffered the tyrannies

of too many certainties.

Teachers, perhaps more than any other professionals, have demonstrated over a significant period of time their ability to adapt and re-invent themselves to meet the changing needs of their students and the wider community. We teach and learn through reading, sharing, dialogue, silence, meditation, experience, through reaching together and alone for something within and beyond ourselves. We teach, believing that the world can be changed through courage, love and inspiration. We reach today for meaning differently, knowing at one and the same time, that meaning is always plural and tenuous. We recognise that many voices reside in one voice and that language and meaning is changed moment by moment by our encounter with it. We search for 'a truth' knowing that 'truth' rests in the intersecting spaces of faith and doubt. And we continue to search, believing that nothing that is sought with integrity is lost in the greater scheme of things. So, inhabiting the 'extra-territorial' space invites us to test the limits of our knowing, seeking fresh encounters with life passionately, painfully, openly, honestly, believing that there – in our fears, doubts, limitations, in our vulnerable histories, in our acknowledged ignorance – lies the beginning of our faith and the seeds of our true strength. It is this process and encounter that we hope to share with our students.

Notes

1 To create a blog, go to :HTTP://www.blogger.com/start

2 A starting point for Renaissance Resources: http://guweb2.gonzaga.edu/faculty/wheeler/resource_lit.renaissance.html

http://www.shakespearetavern.com/synopwhatelizabethanknew.html

3 James VI & 1 on the Divine Right of Kings. 'A Speech to the Lords And Commons of the Parliament at White-Hall, on Wednesday the XXI. Of March, Anno 1609': http://history.wisc.edu/sommerville/351/Jamesdrk.htm

4 For Shakespeare links with on-line versions of both plays, go to: http://www.jsu.edu/depart/english/gates/shtragln.htm

5 For details of the 'Sea-Venture' as well as detailed evidence of documents Shakespeare would have read and used in the writing of The Tempest, go to: http://shakespeareauthorship.com/tempest.html.

See also: William Strachey (1610) 'True repertory of the wreck and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, July 15, 1610'. http://www.arches.uga.edu/~iyengar/Strachey.html

6 There are several translations of Montaigne's 'Of Cannibals'. For Florio's translation with notes, go to: http://www.wwnorton.com/nael/16century/topic_2/cannibal.htm

For a more modern version, go to: http://courses.csusm.edu/hist318ae/Montaigne%20essay.htm

7 For an overview of Said's theory, go to: http://www.thecore.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/poldiscourse/themes.themes.html

8 See Ngugi wa Thiong'o. 'The role of colonial language in creating the image of a savage continent' for a discussion on the politics of language in the colonial context. He calls for the 'equality of space' for all world languages and cultures.

9 For Wikipedia policies and guidelines: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines

References

Bond, E. (1983) *Lear*. (1972) London: Methuen.

Brooks, J.G. and Brooks. M.G. (1999) *In search of understanding: The case for constructivist classrooms.* Virginia: ASCD.

Carey-Webb, A. (1999) 'National and colonial education in Shakespeare's The Tempest', *Early Modern Literary Studies,* Vol. 5, No. 1, 3, pp. 1–39. http://www.shu.ac.uk/elms/05-1/cwebtemp.html

Gandhi, L. (1998) *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Gibran, K. (2002) *The Prophet.* (1926) Victoria: Brolga Publishing.

Graff, G. & Phelan, J. (eds) (2000) *The Tempest, A Case Study in Critical Controversy.* Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford/St. Martins.

Halio, J.L. (ed.) (1992) *The Tragedy of King Lear.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

James VI & I. (1609) 'A Speech to the Lords And Commons of the Parliament at White-Hall, on Wednesday the XXI Of March, Anno 1609'.

http://history.wisc.edu/ sommerville/351/Jamesdrk.htm

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997) 'The role of colonial language in creating the image of a savage continent'. http://www.trinicenter.com/historicalviews/language.htm

Noss R. and Pachler, N. (1999) 'The challenge of new technologies: Doing old things in a new way, or doing new things?', in Peter Mortimore (ed.), *Understanding Pedagogy and its Impact on Learning,* London: Paul Chapman Pub Ltd, pp. 195–211.

Said, E.W. (2000) *Reflections on Exile.* London: Granta Books.

Said, E.W. (1978) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.

Shakespeare, W. (1958: 1971) *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare.* London: Hamlyn Group.

Salkeld, D. (1993) *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Strachey, W. (1610) 'True repertory of the wreck and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, July 15, 1610'. http://www.arches.uga.edu/~iyengar/Strachey.html