

[dis]Locating English: Inhabiting multiple worlds

VATE State Conference 2015

When Alice, in Lewis Carroll's 1865 *Alice in Wonderland*, after falling down a rabbit hole, found herself 'opening out like a telescope', she was so surprised that she 'quite forgot ... how to speak good English'. Increasingly, we as English educators in 2015 find ourselves plunging down our own rabbit holes, confronted by multiple worlds in which, increasingly, 'good English' is far from a constant and agreed upon value. Our worlds, and our students' worlds are constantly 'opening out like a telescope'; this expansion of our circumference is both liberating and daunting.

At VATE 2015, we explore the various locations – physical and metaphoric – inhabited by our students, and how these manifest themselves in language. We dislocate the certainties of the past. In 2015, Alice, dressed in her nineteenth century frock, reads the graffiti on the wall, just as the writing on the wall warns us that we must explore the regions way outside our comfort zones.

We find ourselves plummeting down the rabbit hole of rapidly changing and evolving technological advances which empower us and enlarge our worlds but which can also disconcert us, as certainties shift under our feet. We find ourselves plummeting down the rabbit hole of the accompanying disturbance of the Australian national identity, now more the product of cross-cultural encounters than of an Anglo-Saxon bush experience, if indeed it can be said to be anything. What **is** an Australian text, we ask, as we hurtle onwards, clutching Henry Lawson in one hand, and Ellen van Neerven, Abe Nouk or L-Fresh the Lion in the other? We find ourselves plummeting down the rabbit hole of text selection with the Canon in one hand, fan fiction in the other, and anime, hip-hop, slam, between our teeth.

The vexed question of text selection can create a conflict between the Canon and newer innovative writings. Is fan fiction an insult to the original text and its author, or the ultimate compliment? Can fan fiction be 'good English'? Is fan fiction one of the few means our students have of controlling their own worlds, of writing their own narrative? What is the legal standing of a work of fan fiction?

How does language evoke the spirit of a place? What is the zeitgeist that currently informs what we do? Are the gatekeepers (and who are they?) narrowing our choices? How does the fiction written expressly for young people in the twenty-first century reflect what is more dangerous about the worlds they exist in? Has the innocence of *The Famous Five* been irrevocably lost in our 'far from Wonderland'?

At VATE 2015, therefore, we'll be exploring this emerging wonderland, where the old certainties are (dis)located, and where we have no choice but to confront a whole range of challenging questions.