

## **X-rated English: Are the kids all right with the phallic teacher?**

**Dr Lucinda McKnight, Deakin University**

The phallic teacher is a concept based on the work of sociologist Angela McRobbie (2009) who developed the idea of the phallic girl, or ladette. This girl is allowed to participate in education and in the workplace, as a professional on a par with men and even down at the pub, to match them drink for drink and compare sexual conquests... as long as she simultaneously removes any threat by exaggerating her femininity, for example by hobbling herself with short, tight skirts and high heels. The phallic girl can only access power, be a proper modern girl, through a performance of uber-subservience to feminine ideals. The recent international media coverage of women being sent home from work for refusing to wear high heels illustrates how employment capacity and strict gender regimes work together, even in so-called postfeminist times, when feminism has allegedly achieved its goals.

Through my PhD study, working with English teachers to design curriculum collaboratively, we were thinking about the 'phallic girl' in relation to the girls' media texts we were planning to study. Yet over time, I started to feel that teachers themselves, of all genders, in a feminised profession, were being required to perform as the phallic teacher, 'the empowered, high-quality, tool-wielding teacher discursively created by a neoliberal educational regime' (McKnight, 2016, p. xx). The following brief narrative extract from my PhD thesis describes a teacher presenter at a national curriculum seminar who I felt exemplified these pressures:

*The next speaker, an English teacher, is precision groomed, in a sharp suit, lipstick and killer heels. She stumbles as she climbs up to the podium. She seems uncertain, a doll, a robot. Her words are someone else's, she speaks in the halting manner of a tourist with a phrase book. Her presentation demonstrates 'absolute whole school consistency of practice that is data driven'. She assures us 'we are shifting the existing data to move our targets forwards'. A curriculum mapping software program has glammed up her PowerPoint graphs of student achievement: apparently 'stakeholders' like this approach.*

Phallic teachers must comply with government directives and renounce former freedoms (such as the capacity to design curriculum). They must worship the phallus, adorning themselves with all manner of masculinist tools, such as:

- technical language (such as that of semiotics and systemic functional linguistics)
- rubrics
- criteria
- outcomes
- standards
- benchmarks
- descriptors
- national aptitude testing
- national curricula
- league tables

- graphs
- statistics
- data
- purchased, prepackaged, teacher-proof curricula

I provide one example here of a teacher in the PhD study describing how she feels about the language of the national curriculum's descriptors:

*It'd be nice to have some joy in the experience. Look at this: 'Understand and explain how the text structures and the language features of texts become more complex [brief hiatus]... underst... ident... underlying structures such as taxonomies such as cause and effect, extended metaphor'. It's just so... It's... It's... so [draws word out] crushing.*

But why is this crush necessarily 'masculine'? Curriculum theorist Madeleine Grumet, writing in the 1980s, identified bureaucracy and rationalisation in schools as masculinist—this metaphor represents a 'defined progression towards an end product' (1988, p. 24), like traditionally male work in a factory, work with a specific, pre-known and determined ejaculatory outcome. It is easy to forget that outcomes are not a given, but a highly contested educational concept. Michael Apple (1986), similarly, points out that educational tools have politics attached to them, and this is always a gendered politics. He emphasises that teachers' labour, which is potentially deskilled by the tools listed above, is women's labour and the proletarianisation (reduction of pay and status) and standardisation of teaching is related to patriarchy, and male dominance. Recognition of such changes as 'masculine' has also entered the media, with critiques of 'the macho cult of performance' (Scott, 2016) in education.

In my experience, the voices promoting the Australian Curriculum: English nationally were largely those of male academics. Those they addressed were largely female teachers. Those who create and program the software being used in classrooms are largely male. Those who must implement this software are largely female. The changes to teachers' work described cannot be separated from the kind of broader cultural politics that have created the phallic girl.

Gender is a curriculum issue. Sexism is a curriculum issue. Who is in control here? And as Apple would ask, 'how are relations of domination and subordination reproduced and challenged' (1986, p. 14) through these forms of interaction and the circulation of curriculum materials offered as compulsory preliminaries to being perceived as a proper, modern teacher? This is the trade-off for the phallic teacher: uber-subservience to external forces, and a simultaneous flurry of complicit and techno-fancy 'professionalism' aspiring to apparent power through recognition and promotion. Of course, teachers will not always comply, and there are multiple forms of resistance to this address to the phallic teacher... yet always, the pressure to comply is there.

It is also important to acknowledge that some teachers, including those in my study, find pleasure and security in prescription, and there is complexity in how we might take up or resist calls to be phallic teachers. One younger English teacher involved in my PhD study, who also teaches Humanities, says:

*In New South Wales, because I'm trained in New South Wales, the curriculum's much more specific about what we must teach. So when I came to Victoria, I thought, 'How do they decide what they want to teach?' I'm trained in SOSE [Studies of Society and Environment], so they say in Geography you must teach hurricanes, cyclones, whatever it is, they're very specific. But in Victoria they'll just say Natural Disasters. And I've noticed that the schools that I've been teaching at, everyone does it differently and it's like some of the schools, not this one thank God, don't even really refer back to the curriculum, because they've just interpreted it however they want.*

As this teacher finished her comment, in a curriculum planning meeting, everyone spoke at once over the top of her last words, agreeing and disagreeing. Teachers of my generation remember a time when there were no outcomes, rubrics, descriptors, national curricula and so on. There may have been a dusty, dog-eared Year 7 English syllabus at the bottom of a filing cabinet somewhere. Was teaching worse back then? Was learning? While not wanting to romanticise the past, there is no denying that there was less of a distance between invention and execution (Apple, 1986). Power resided more with the teacher, not with blunt and distant phallic tools dictating content and producing data for analysis.

There is no space to summarise my full conference presentation here. Suffice to say I deconstructed some of the crude tools of masculinist education, in particular, visibility, rubrics and outcomes, or outcums, as I've re-named them, and considered whether kids and teachers are alright with these tools. I made links between these tools, and pornography, especially in relation to fetishising the visual—hence the X-rated title.

As I'm on the VATE Professional Learning and Research Committee, I know from the conference participants' feedback that some delegates, including myself, were uneasy about Holly Ransom's keynote address. On the day, however, no one questioned or commented, not even me. It is hard to argue with corporatized, entrepreneurialised, technologised, neoliberalised educational imperatives without seeming old fashioned, or Luddite, or even a kill-joy. It is difficult to question whether solutions to educational problems lie with business, when this is the thrust (and I use this word deliberately) of government, and when the competitive language of markets pervades everything we do.

At the end of my lecture, a number of teachers approached me, some with tears in their eyes. 'This is why I'm leaving teaching,' said one. These teachers agreed that while they shared some of my concerns, it is almost impossible to have these kinds of conversations in schools, and to have influence over dominant regimes of thinking. For me, these gender-related concepts have helped firm up my own resistance to some of the changes I've perceived in English teaching since I qualified in 1989, and I hope they may be useful for others, too.

As a result of our conversations and subsequent emails, we have started an email group to circulate useful materials supporting teachers in initiating these conversations and providing support for their arguments, especially with senior staff in schools. If you are interested in joining the group, or indeed in doing further study yourself in this area of English curriculum studies, please email me at [lmcknight@deakin.edu.au](mailto:lmcknight@deakin.edu.au). If you would like to read the original paper, 'Meet the phallic teacher: Designing curriculum and identity in a neoliberal imaginary'

(McKnight, 2016), which won the Australian Association for Research in Education Early Career Researcher Award in 2015, I would be very happy to send you a copy.

I would also like to encourage readers to consider joining the VATE Professional Learning and Research Committee, which enables discussion and debate both within the committee, and within the broader English teaching community through the program of professional learning we develop. This is such a rewarding committee to be part of, with both experienced and recently qualified teachers arguing passionately for various understandings of what teaching and learning in English should and could be. Please contact Mary Mason: [mary.mason@bigpond.com](mailto:mary.mason@bigpond.com) if you would like to join the conversation! Are the kids alright with the phallic teacher? That's open for debate. And what about the teachers? Are they alright? There is much to discuss!

### References

Apple, M. 1986. *Teachers and Texts; A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education*, New York, Routledge.

Grumet, M. R. 1988. *Bitter Milk*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press.

McKnight, L. 2016. Meet the phallic teacher: Designing curriculum and identity in a neoliberal imaginary. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 43, 473-486.

McRobbie, A. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London, SAGE.

Scott, P. 2016. Lies, damned lies and university performance targets. *The Guardian*, Tuesday 2 December.