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CPL Podcast: The Joy of Teaching Reading and Writing **7-10**

Host: Carly Boreland
With: Deb McPherson

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to this JPL podcast for the Teacher Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I am the Editor of the Journal of Professional Learning. I'm talking with Deb McPherson about the *Joy of Teaching Reading and Writing in Years 7-10 using the NSW English Syllabus 7-10*. Deb, welcome!

Deb McPherson:

Thank you very much.

Carly Boreland:

Deb, do you want to tell us a little bit about how long you have spent immersed in the joy of reading and writing and some of the things you have done as a teacher and beyond?

Deb McPherson:

Well, I have been an English teacher for about 28 years and I spent a few years in the bureaucracy at the Board of Studies running English for the NSW Department of Education and Training. The best time I had was in the classroom and the best time in the classroom was when I could see students hooked on reading and writing, inspired and enthused by the texts we were looking at, and more importantly, some of the texts they had chosen themselves. For me, reading and writing is part of my life. I think I was very fortunate to grow up in a household where books were valued and important, and now it is very exciting to be in a world where texts have exploded. We've not just got *fiction* and *poetry* and *drama*. We've got *digital texts*, *graphic novels*, *picture books*. It is a huge range of texts we can explore and that's very exciting for students because we are talking to them about texts they involve themselves in their real world.

Carly Boreland:

This is really important to you - *student choice*. Is that the place to start when you are thinking about how you are going to set up your English class for teaching reading and how that is connected to teaching writing?



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Deb McPherson:

That is a great question. Because I want you to imagine a situation where you are told you have to read this particular book and you are not given any choice. "This is the book you are going to have to read." It doesn't matter what your prior knowledge, or understanding, is about this book - whether you have come across it before or you haven't - you're just going to have to read it, or view it. There is a bit of resentment around that. You'd like to think that your prior knowledge and understanding might be valued a little. Or you might be asked about what you are interested in. I think one of the problems we have, sometimes in English, is that *student choice* is relegated out of the classroom. And it needs to be there - front and centre - and so an element of choice is really important. Teachers know a lot about the text that they want students to explore but we have to give them some autonomy and some choice as well. So I like to think that when you are setting up your programs, in an English classroom, you do remember about the importance of choice. And think about it in your own personal life - how important it is to have some control over what you are reading and viewing.

Carly Boreland:

I know that sometimes the sort of practical constraints of a big, busy school can mean that it can be a bit tricky to make those things that you know you should be doing possible. I wonder, could you give us some ideas for how you can effectively use your faculty's budget, or effectively use the resources that you have in your school, to provide that choice. I imagine sometimes that teachers find themselves in the book room thinking "Well this is what I've got - I suppose we will use it again!"

Deb McPherson:

That is very true. And public schools are bound by their book rooms, in many cases, and the budgets they get. So it is certainly that you have got to be an advocate. Certainly, if you are a Head Teacher of English, you have to be an advocate in getting more money and there is no way around this one. You need to get better access to the new and exciting texts that are out there. You can get your P&C on side, especially in the case of a new syllabus. The new 7-10 syllabus is relatively new and there are strong possibilities that your P&C want their students to have access to the newest and best texts that are around. There is the possibility that you can get your librarian on side and make sure that wide reading boxes are available, in different areas, for students in your classrooms. There are collaborations and partnerships that will make a difference in a school if you can persuade people that *enriching* the choices that students have is a really good way to engage and enthuse them about learning. Functional literacy is vital and important; it is necessary *but not sufficient*. We need to go further and farther with students.



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Carly Boreland:

I suppose, sometimes, it may feel like everyone has to be doing the same thing at the same time. But, if you needed to be able to use a particular text, there is no reason you have to buy 150 of those is there? You can stagger things?

Deb McPherson:

You can certainly stagger and that is one of the good things that Head Teachers can do. They can organise the year's learning so that people can re-use, and exchange, materials and resources and enrich their classrooms by what their predecessors have done. One of the most exciting things I have seen happening in classrooms is when students are asked to create a unit of work around a text to share with another class (maybe a younger class, or in the same year) and their enthusiasm for "Well I am in charge of this. And I am actually making up some activities, and looking at some of the context of this text and I am going to be giving this to another class to look at!" That is a very powerful position to be in for students and it also makes them look at the texts in a different way. They are starting to be excited about sharing *their* insights into the text.

Carly Boreland:

I wanted to ask you as well, Deb, about *digital texts*. Sometimes I can be even guilty of thinking there is some kind of gimmickry going on out in the digital world, but I don't know if that's necessarily the case for English. What do you think about the place of *digital texts*?

Deb McPherson:

Well, I think they are a wonderful way to explore what is happening in student's lives. When you look at what students read and write every day: a lot of it is social media; it is to do with using their phone; their texting. That is a really good place to start. But there are very sustained, and exciting, *digital texts* to look at. For instance, one of the things that I really enjoy is called *Inanimate Alice*. It is a digital text actually made by educational authorities all around the world to try to engage students and it is a series of fascinating episodes in the life of Alice. We watched Alice grow up; we watch her in different countries; her parents move to different jobs and she goes with them. And we travel with her: we go to Russia; we go to Italy; we go to England. And we watch Alice developing into a software developer; we watch her grow and change. It is very exciting, and highly interactive, and available free online, and it is a really great text to do from Year 7 -12 in a way. It is a very good text and I think the care and thought that went into it makes it very exciting for students. There are elements of gaming in it as well. It uses music; it uses video; it uses graphics; it uses all the lovely bits that you would like to put together to make a *digital text*. It is a great model. In fact one of the things that *Inanimate Alice* has done it has spawned this huge amount of copying. So schools are making their own episode; their next episode for Alice. They take Alice somewhere else: to different country to a different experience. You only have to go online and to see these remarkable compositions. Because we are talking not just about *reading* but



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we are talking about *composing* and *writing* as well. And what some of these texts do are wonderful stimuli for students to explore and discover their writing abilities. So that's why what we talk about in the syllabus: *responding and composing* because one can lead to the other.

Carly Boreland:

I like the opportunities there too, as Alice is travelling around the world, to remind students “one day you will go to that place; you will go there.”

Deb McPherson:

She is a great character, and she is a traveller and that is really good.

Carly Boreland:

English can be about living: it's not just about *reading and composing* and *writing* but the lives that people live.

Deb McPherson:

It is indeed: and this is just one example of a digital text. But, when we look at the syllabus, we have to discover a whole range of *multimodal texts*. So it's not just digital. It is also *film* and *graphic novels*, *picture books*, as well as *websites* and *Apps*. Apps are fascinating too. There is a wonderful App of the book of Anne Frank [*The Diary of Anne Frank*], who wrote an extraordinary work before she was taken away and killed by the Nazis in WWII. And this book is now brought to a new generation. It is a classic work but unfolding in an App situation: you can read the book; you can find links to photographs to the timeline; you can go through the book and see those aspects of the book where Anne talks about what it is to be a writer. So here is a classic work of literature, reimagined and invigorated in a situation where it is a digital text.

Carly Boreland:

I wonder if you could help us to Deb with how one text can work across different Yeargroups. Is there a suggestion (and it doesn't have to be the two books you have talked about) but maybe at some point later on about how you pitch it for Year7? And what bits you might look at more for Year8 or Year9 or Year10?

Deb McPherson:

Well, I think something like *Inanimate Alice* as we watch Alice grow up (she ages throughout the episodes) so it makes sense you might do the China section with Year7 (and I know it is also done in some primary schools in Year 6) And as she is getting older, you would take the one where she is in England (that is more when she is 15 or 16) so that makes more sense that you would perhaps look at it



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in those years. But, there are many different ways to look at *digital texts* in the classroom and getting students to compose their own *digital texts* is one of the key things. So some of the books I love, and am really inspired by, are *science fiction texts* or a range of *genres*. But *book trailers* are available for teachers to use. So you can have a new text come out like *Illuminae* which is a terrific *space opera* and yet the *book trailer* that tells you about this book is electrifying. And students could actually make their own because they have got the model. Here is the wonderful interrogation about a young man (about what is happening in his life) as his girlfriend break up, and then their planet gets invaded, and they are off on two different space ships, and a plague breaks out. It's got everything and it is very well written, using a whole range of different mediums. I really think making up a trailer for this is a gift; students love the book so much. I started reading this book and I'm getting on the train from the South Coast to come up to Sydney for something; my head did not come up, I was literally so entranced by this book that I looked up and suddenly I was at Central and 2 ½ hours had passed. And that is the sort of book that we want students engaging with, something that takes them away completely to a different world and a different experience.

Carly Boreland:

Our listeners wouldn't be able to see the passion that is dripping, exuding from you as you talk about these books that you love and these texts that you love. How important is pleasure for students in reading and how can we help to encourage that?

Deb McPherson:

I think it must be the only syllabus that actually has the word "*pleasure*" in it. The NSW 7-10 English syllabus actually says, in its first outcome, that "a student responds to and composes texts for understanding, interpretation, critical analysis, imaginative expression *and pleasure*" And we mustn't forget the enjoyment and pleasure that got us excited and interested in books. That is lovely to see echoed in the syllabus and, in fact, as you go through it, that comes up again and again. We want students to find such pleasure and excitement in texts that they will come back to them ; that they *will* be hooked. Many of the students in schools are disengaged from what we are asking them to do. You know, if we bring out the class novel and we sit it down and we have 25 questions on every chapter; this is not engaging for students. We want them to become interested and enthused by the works that we are looking at. And if we give them some choice; if we arrange a whole collection of texts. The best example I can think of is when you want students to enjoy *poetry*. *Poetry* is probably the worst taught thing in schools, in the sense that often it is inexplicable and students get tied up in a whole range of different techniques without actually getting any enjoyment from it. But if you say "look here is a whole range of anthologies" (and you have lined up the librarian ; you've got 25 or 30 books) and they are allowed to through and find the poems that speak to them (that say something to them). Then they have to justify why that poem is important to them. And then they have to make a class anthology where they put all those poems in an anthology with their rationale for why it deserved a place. And I



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think that starts to make *poetry* live for students. Then as well as finding a poem that they like, and a topic that is important to them, what about writing one using that as a model? Or, looking at the other works that students have chosen, and saying “Oh! My class mate chose that. Well I might be prepared to read that because I respect their opinion”. So it is interesting to get that collection together and then publish it. Put it in the library. So “here’s 7-8’s anthology of poetry which they really liked and written.” And then 7Z comes along and they pick up those anthologies and they read what their colleagues (what their classmates) have said about a particular poem. You can just see how it catches their interest and you can extrapolate that to a whole range of different anthologies. *Short stories, film reviews*; there is a whole range of ways you can get students sharing their enthusiasm about texts.

Carly Boreland:

Deb, can I ask you maybe a too obvious a question, but why does poetry matter?

Deb McPherson:

Ah! Poetry! Whenever you are faced with life’s difficulties,(where life’s hardest things have happened) – what happens? Just recently we had that terrible explosion in Manchester, where people were injured, killed and one of the first responses was from a poet, who tried to capture the spirit and response of people in Manchester. He stood up in front of a crowd and read out a poem about what it meant to live in that city and the cohesion and the harmony and the wonders that they had created and how they needed to keep going. And he captured , for many people, that huge emotion of that time. That is what poetry does: it is intense; it captures really important moments in our lives. And it is, in terms of literature, it is probably the most important thing we come back to. When somebody dies, when somebody weds, when somebody has an amazing experience, when somebody is distressed or depressed: very often they will turn to *poetry* as the way to expressing their emotions and fears and failings, hopes and dreams and aspirations. So *poetry* is something we need in our lives. And it can also be very funny, one of the best poems I have done in schools is Roald Dahl’s *Revolting Rhymes*. And kids just love Roald Dahl because, you know, when he re-tells stories like *Cinderella*, I guess you think you know the story but you don’t. The real one is much more gory. The phony one; the one you know was thought up years and years ago and made it all soft and sappy, just to keep the children happy... and then, of course, it goes on and it has a wonderful re-interpretation of *Cinderella*. So poetry gives us everything: it is compact; it’s intense; it’s something that we can write about ourselves. It is a medium we can use to write about our greatest fears and our greatest hopes. So I just think we have to keep going with *poetry*. It is the best thing that is happening in our lives sometimes.

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Carly Boreland:

Deb, I am going to confess something to you about using the syllabuses - sometimes I don't read every word of the first forty pages of the syllabus.

Deb McPherson:

Shame on you! There is great stuff there!

Carly Boreland:

I suspect, I am not alone. But there are some really key and important parts in there. I am really interested about this and especially the new online formats of the syllabuses as well. You can easily flick past (or never even flick past), just not even go to some of those sections. Something that I wanted to ask you about was the *Cross Curriculum Priorities* and how they fit, through teaching *reading* and *writing*, and across the English syllabus.

Deb McPherson:

Well, that is a great question because it is something now that is across all syllabuses, not just English. But of course, English teachers are the *best* positioned, with the best resources, to actually engage with this *learning across the curriculum*. And they make a lot of sense when you look at some of the things that are there. So, for instance, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures*; it is really important that we consider what our first Australians can contribute and understand about their culture and their interpretation of life in Australia. So that is a really important one to look at, and I've got some great texts that you can consider when you look at *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Culture*. Another *cross curriculum priority* is *Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia*. That is our neighborhood; we live in Asia. Paul Keating, I think, said "we have to get on with the hood"; the place we are) And we need to know more about the neighborhood we are in, and contribute to an understanding of their cultures. And we also need to know about a lot of the Australians who come from an Asian background - and their take on Australia and the sort of contributions that they can bring to our evolving, and amazing, Australian population. When I was a Deputy at a high school, one of the first things, when new teachers came to the school I would say "Look, have a look at our school; but look at it through your eyes, because you will see things here that we are doing really well but you will also see things we are not doing well and with your input we can make a better school." It is exactly the same with a country, we are not actually doing everything well that is for sure and we need support and help from people around us and the neighborhood we live in is a very important part of that.

Another area that is very important is *Sustainability* and this isn't just about the environment (although it is very much about the environment). It is also about social sustainability: about the ability for students, for everyone, to be able to advocate for change, or for important things that they think they need to



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happen in our society and our culture. So we have a range of texts that students could explore under those particular areas.

Carly Boreland:

Can I ask you about how you do dramatic reading and how you manage reading, and student reading, and the teacher reading in the classroom?

Deb McPherson:

Yes, that is a really good question because it is not just reading around the classroom. That is often death to it. If you are looking at a play, for instance, what you need to do is issue the play, get students into groups, give them important positions that they have to take about a particular part of the play(so they are responsible for a bit of the play). They have to go away, workshop it, think about how they are going to present it and come back to the rest of the group. So you have actually got maybe four or five different groups working on a different part of the play which they present maybe as a freeze frame maybe as one word summaries, but they are trying to give the rest of the group an idea of what is happening in their particular part of the play. Suddenly, they are up and out of their seats and they are not sitting just reading a line out of a book. They are actually *activating* the play. They are *dramatizing* the play. They are doing something with it, rather than that sometimes very laborious – “oh, we will just read a line” and someone else with read another line. So, the first and most important thing about when you are doing a play is to get them out of their seats; give them responsibility for a particular part of it; make sure that it actually comes to life – that is really important. The other thing is sometimes you need to give, with a novel, a start. Maybe you read a section yourself; the teacher reads something. Make audio recordings available to students. Some students really will respond to an audio version that will get them started and then they can take over for themselves. Have some purpose in the reading - “you are actually reading this because you need to explain it to another class” or “you need to give a presentation, on the assembly, about the impact that this book had on your life”.

Carly Boreland:

Nothing sharpens student’s enthusiasm for the task like the urgency to discuss it. Deb, can I ask you a little bit about the connection between *reading* and *writing*? So if we have all these wonderful texts that we can spark joy and passion and enthusiasm for: can we maintain that joy and passion when we get to the writing?

Deb McPherson:

Because that is the other side of the coin, so we have got this *response* to literature and to the texts, and then we *compose* based on the stimulus that these texts have generated in our lives. So, it is very hard



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sometimes... a blank piece of paper – “what do I do? What do I do?” But if I have read something, or seen something, or experienced something, then my opportunities for *composing* are much stronger. I can have motivation: I’ve seen what somebody can share. Maybe I can share something too. We can take themes, we can take the way it is composed, the structure of something, some of the language that is being used, and students can use that in their own writing. “Readers are writers and writers are robbers.” I always thought that was great, because you borrow stuff, you know. I mean, I am not talking about plagiarism at exam time, I am talking about nobody can write something that is unrelated to something that has happened in their lives, or something they have read, or viewed, or seen. So it is really important to acknowledge the fact that “readers are robbers” and to take some of the best things that you have seen, or read, and use them in creating your own texts. And if you read, your vocabulary increases; it is enriched. If you view, your understanding of visual texts is improved, and you get greater understanding of about how you might create something like that. So, impoverished students, who simply do tick a box exercises, don’t get the tools that they need to create for themselves in a meaningful way. It is really important, when you think about that fact, that the lowest ability students, if we just confront them with a sole diet of functional literacy and pen and paper activities and comprehension and vocabulary work, but if we engage them with IT and novels and poetry there is an opportunity for them to grow and be enriched. We want *meaningful engagement* with texts that might lead to projects that students become passionate about. You have got to have a real audience. I am sitting here talking to you and I have a real audience because I am seeing you nod your head. I am getting *feedback* from you and I am thinking “this is not going too badly!” And that is what students need; they need that *feedback*. In fact, all the research now is showing us that, the more *feedback* students get immediately in the classroom the greater impetus they have to create and to understand the world around them. And that is what English teachers offer.

Carly Boreland:

Something that your great colleague, Jackie Manuel, writes about that struck me (and I hadn’t thought about it until, I suppose, I thought about what she thought about it) She says that we often *read about writing and write about reading* but that maybe there is an opportunity to write into writing; that it takes more time to write and the act of writing can lead to more and better writing.

Deb McPherson:

Get into writing regularly and often and frequently is part of the key. You shouldn’t be going into school and not engaging with the pen nearly every day or, the computer. It has to be a routine that you get into and I think that is one of the things *-writing often and writing lots.*



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Carly Boreland:

What do you think might be a good goal? Say for a new teacher setting out on their journey of becoming the English teacher that they want to be. In their mind, maybe, what is a good goal for your class for writing each day?

Deb McPherson:

Well to make it happen! To have writing every day in the classroom is really important. Yes. And, writing with a purpose. And writing reflectively, you know, “I am reflecting on what I have learnt.” At the end of a unit of work [it is important] that students have the opportunity to reflect on that unit of work. And they are asked a very important question - “If this unit of work was going to be run again, for another class, what would you do to improve it?” Now, suddenly, they are a partner in this education process, not just a recipient. And I think that is really important that they get the opportunity to reflect, and to help to improve work. Because units of work - we write them all the time and you have got to find out “Did it work?” “How much did you learn from this unit?” “How much were you involved in it?” “Would you recommend it?” “Would you change it?” “What was the best part about it?” So, suddenly, we are asking their judgment and, you know yourself, if somebody respects you enough to say “Look I value your opinion on something”; that is key. We do respect our students and we want them to leave us revitalized and excited about English and life ahead.

Carly Boreland:

I have been in awe listening to you today and your passion and enthusiasm for English, thank you so much for chatting with us.

Deb McPherson:

It is a pleasure and I just can't think of a better job in the world than to be an English teacher. So just give my heartfelt thanks to all of you out there, who are English teachers and who are doing the best you can to enrich the lives of your students.

Carly Boreland:

You've been listening to the JPL podcast for the NSW Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I've been speaking with Deb McPherson about teaching English especially the *Joy of Reading and Writing from 7-10* and if you'd like to find out more about our podcasts or to listen to further podcasts, you can go to our website at www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts



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CONCLUSION:

The JPL podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland and technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Deb McPherson is a reader, author and lover of books. She is an English teacher who has spent 30 years as a classroom teacher, Head Teacher, Deputy, BOS Curriculum Officer and DET Manager of English as well as lecturing and tutoring at tertiary institutions. She spent many years on the committee selecting the HSC texts.