



The NATE Multicultural and Diversity Committee Past, Present and Future

Valerie Coultas describes the pioneering work of Joan Goody and NATE’s Multicultural Committee in promoting oracy-based pedagogies and engagement with literature from around the world, and explains how the committee continues to champion these approaches.

‘We should be aware that where cultures are merging, something interestingly new can be created’ (Goody and Stratta: 1977a:1)

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NATE’s Multicultural and Diversity Committee has a long history of celebrating both active learning through talk, and pupil engagement with literature from around the world. The committee’s ideas about pedagogy, including use of language in the classroom and the role of pupils’ own life experiences, are based on seminal research into how pupils acquire and enrich their spoken and written language, and are rooted in good English teaching. But increasingly they are being side-lined in English teaching by the knowledge-based, cultural restorationist approach of the Goveian English curriculum (Coultas, 2013). They are therefore worth revisiting and re-evaluating, as by revisiting the past we can produce a better future.

The Past

Joan Goody, a founder member of NATE and former Head of English at Clissold Park Comprehensive School, established NATE’s Multicultural Committee over forty years ago. In the 1970s, she was as an advisory teacher with responsibility for West Indian pupils in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). As Carol Fox notes in her obituary of Joan (2008):

‘Joan was a quiet revolutionary who detested the hierarchies in education. It was always a struggle - for mixed ability classes, for creating our own exam syllabuses, and for the reading and teaching of Caribbean and world literature that few then knew. She passionately wanted such concerns to be at the centre of good English teaching, not hived off as a minority category.’

'She undertook two teaching exchanges to Trinidad and established the Caribbean Teachers' Exchange, linking teachers from the London borough of Brent and the ILEA with Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad. She also worked with John and Sarah La Rose at their New Beacon bookshop, another connection to feed into schools and into NATE. She inaugurated NATE's multicultural committee and ran workshops at NATE conferences, introducing us to new poets and novelists, disseminating the books via New Beacon [the pioneering publishing house and bookshop based in North London and specialising in Black and Asian literature] and showing teachers how they could be used to support children's reading and writing'.

In 1978 the NATE Multicultural Committee under her stewardship published *The Teaching of English in Multicultural Britain*, suggesting that language and learning materials should be drawn from a wide range of cultures. The germs of the later GCSE Poetry Anthologies, with their 'poems from different cultures', can be seen developing here (although they emerged in perhaps a more limited form).

Joan commented that, in secondary schools, pupils of different cultural traditions are *'all too often subjected to learning situations where they are not properly in the picture, have not got their bearings, and cannot see how the parcels of knowledge that are being given fit into any real life framework'* (Goody and Stratta, 1977a:2). A central aspect of good English teaching for her was the child centred approach that started *'with a child's language culture and experience'* (1977b:3).

She argued that literature could help children *'to sort our human values...but that they cannot always see clearly in the rushed overcrowded lives they lead'* (1977a:5). She points out that *'some loyalties create blind spots'* which can *'prevent clear objective looking'* (1977c:51). Literature could provide *'a peephole through which to look calmly at a limited circle of life, which is outside themselves and yet related to them in deeper ways. In the characters and the issues'* (1977a:5). She refers to these discussions as sometimes creating a safe *'third area'* (1977b:6) where fantasy and imagination can stimulate thinking.

In 1992, 1995 and in 2003 respectively NATE published three significant books – *Multicultural Perspectives in the English Classroom* and *Opening New Worlds: Explorations in the teaching of literature with an international dimension* (both edited by Joan Goody) and *Reading Across Cultures* (written jointly by Joan and Phillip Yearwood). The latter was a text which contained detailed reviews of literature from a range of cultures and demonstrated a sophisticated and sensitive approach to the use of literature in the classroom, partly funded by Greenwich LEA and informed by extensive research and discussion with teachers. This text stands out as a seminal work, giving teachers access to new authors and new ideas for sharing literature in diverse classrooms. Such literature, she wrote, *'helped teachers and pupils alike to understand the extent and effects of colonialism'* (1977b:4).

Talk about life and literature was also central to the NATE Multicultural Committee from its inception. Joan Goody thought that *'discussion', 'the stance of the teacher', 'the activities the pupils engage in and the ensuing reaction and interaction between the pupils was of crucial concern'* (1977b:1). She noted that sometimes cultural diversity could enrich the discussion, *'bringing a fresher questioning, a deeper probing'* (1977a:1).

Her writing demonstrates many examples of topics that stimulated authentic responses from the pupils, such as Enoch Powell's famous speech, which led to *'excited, passionate, often fluent speaking with the warmth of feeling'* (1977c:50) being captured on tape. But she was also aware of the need to be sensitive to children's experiences *'even if they come from overtly racist backgrounds'* (1977 b: 2). She discusses how boys from mixed backgrounds in a 'Black Power' discussion discussed the issue of revenge and noted the sharing of that *'mixture of feelings ... seeing things from so many different viewpoints'*. (1977a:10)

The importance of children gaining practice in working together, *'where discussion is needed to get things done ... was a long term business'* (1977a:1). The role of the teacher in setting up and extending talk repertoires and the ability to *'create the demand for more precision and subtlety in the use of language'* (1977a:10) among the students was also important. It might be necessary to *'manipulate the groups, to find reasons for trying out different combinations of pupils'* to fully understand *'the principles of collaborative learning'* (1977b:5) if teachers were to assist children in understanding each other.

The Present

Over the last decade, the NATE Multicultural and Diversity Committee has continued to build on those early aspirations. A central concern has continued to be the promotion of talk and active engagement with a wide range of literature.

Working with the Collaborative Learning Project (<http://www.collaborativelearning.org/>), a project established in 1983 with the support of ILEA, which was also part of teacher action research that led to the National Oracy Project and the Language in the Curriculum Project, the committee has continued to promote the value of learning talk, sharing Collaborative Learning's view that *'activities to promote talk take time to make, but by sharing them, we hope to inspire others to work in similar ways'*; that *'children new to English need exposure to visually stimulating collaborative talk activities in short sessions throughout their learning'*; and that teachers *'are more creative and develop more engaging and exciting resources when they plan and work collaboratively inside and outside the classroom'* (Collaborative Learning, 2020).

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The Collaborative Learning site has many examples of the recent work of the committee, including work on KS1, KS2, KS3 and KS4 texts; ground rules for talk; a set of Key Stage 3 schemes of work based on autobiography and ‘Reading Around the World’, which includes an open ended template for planning schemes of work; and materials on active storytelling through talk and drama in junior schools in Europe, produced in association with the Comenius Association.

The committee has continued to lead workshops at London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE) and NATE conferences, and has published articles in NATE journals sharing talk-based approaches to reading literature and texts. These approaches are inspired by the principles of collaborative learning and do not just invite pupils to talk to one another but, in Pauline Gibbons’ words (mirroring Joan Goody’s ideas), ‘require pupils to talk to one another’ (Gibbons, 2009) so that they make meaning together and model different talk repertoires. This is particularly helpful to pupils new to English.

Over the last three years the committee has been working with European teacher educators and beginning teachers in the Language and Culture group of the Comenius Association on an active storytelling and intercultural learning project that encourages pupils to retell and re-enact both traditional and contemporary stories. The aim of intercultural learning builds on notions of valuing linguistic diversity by aiming to ‘gain a better understanding of one’s own culture and other cultures’ in order to ‘increase international tolerance and understanding.’ (Rose, 2003). At recent LATE and NATE conferences we led workshops that focused on active storytelling for pupils with a second language around personal stories, classic and contemporary texts. The importance of personal expression in the learning of a new language and engagement with literature was highlighted in these sessions.

The committee has also been working with the Communications, Literacies and Language special interest group at Kingston University School of Education, developing an oracy module for an MA English Language Teaching Course (Coults and Booth, 2018), and has recently been involved in developing new resources around Asian literature and planning a workshop on Asian Film and Storytelling in multilingual classrooms by revisiting the work of Satyajit Ray and revising the global learning booklist.

The Future

Understanding the role that talk and engagement with a wide range of literature has on children in classrooms when mediated by a good English teacher is of long-lasting value. These issues, as well as the complexity of opening up debate in the classroom, continue to be addressed in the work of this committee. The early work of the committee was done in a different context, but the essential principles of collaborative learning are still vital in the English classroom; the value of teacher collaboration and action research around English teachers’ practice still stands. Through such work, NATE can continue to have a role in enriching teacher knowledge and promote authentic teacher networks – a role which is even more important now than in the days when LEAs were able to give more real support to teachers.

A new webpage for the committee is in preparation on the NATE website, as well as a WhatsApp group. A Joan Goody Award for teachers and researchers working in this area is to be established, which could continue to celebrate this area of NATE’s work in the future. We plan to continue to liaise with institutions and to involve new members in identifying issues for development at teachmeets and at NATE and LATE events. We invite NATE members to join us in this important work, so please contact the addresses below if you are interested.

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For suggestions for multicultural reading, please visit the NATE/Collaborative Learning global booklist available at <http://www.collaborativelearning.org/globallearningbooklist.html>



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