Reflections on ALEA and Weaving with Words 2016    Charlotte Franz

As my application for sponsorship stated, Port Augusta Secondary School (PASS) is located at the head of the Spencer Gulf, 332km north of Adelaide. The school has six feeder primary schools; Augusta Park, Carlton R-9, Flinders View, Port Augusta West, Stirling North and Wilsden. 35% of enrolled students are Aboriginal and there is a significant number of Guardianship of the Ministry (GOM) students. 20% of enrolled students have a recognised disability and a Special Class and Learning Community Class are run on site as well as a fast growing Youth Engagement Strategy programme. A vibrant Aboriginal Education team and other programmes such as Industry Pathways and Workabout also exist to provide support for the school community. PASS is a complex school with recognised specific learning needs and goals for high achievement and success for all. The school is constantly striving to improve student outcomes in all areas including literacy.

In my working career I have always been involved in literacy, whether as a librarian in the State Library or as a manager at Dymocks in Adelaide or now as a teacher in Port Augusta. As a result of this interest and yes, even passion, since becoming a teacher I have striven to improve literacy and introduce a love of reading and the study of English to all students I encounter. A concern that has grown over the 10 years of my teaching career has been the large number of students progressing through schooling who either struggle with literacy or simply have never read and enjoyed a book. Link this to the rapid changes that are occurring in society and the speed at which career options are changing and the need to be literate and to develop lifelong learning skills using literacy and the concern has become more intense.

When ALEA announced that the National Conference would be held in Adelaide and the list of speakers and presenters became public I decided it was critical to use this opportunity to improve my knowledge and understanding of how to teach English successfully in the classroom today. Previously I had wanted to attend but the cost had made it prohibitive especially as it was held interstate. As a leader my goal is to share this knowledge with my faculty and other teaching staff at our site to improve the teaching of literacy at our school by all staff.
Although the Thursday was not covered by the grant, due to the support given by both our Principal and the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia I was able to attend and discover ‘Dartmouth 1966’ and listen as experts unpacked the original conference and work completed since. From a personal perspective this was an incredible day that has resulted in my diving into books and articles produced as a result of Dartmouth such as Dixon’s ‘Growth through English’.

The day provided me with the impetus to enrol as an Alumni member at the University of Adelaide so that I can remotely access multiple readings and resources linked to the study of English and literacy. The main messages that I have taken away from the Thursday are linked to continuing to read current and past research and to further improve my own understanding of teaching and literacy. I am currently reading works by Dixon and by Melanie Schoffner who spoke on the Thursday and was also inspiring. As a result of listening to Schoffner I am in the...
process of re-thinking and adjusting strategies I use when working with student teachers to enable them to develop classroom skills.

Friday started out with an address by Minister of Education, Susan Close. It was refreshing to hear a politician who is passionate and knowledgeable about education and reading highlight the need for a strong education system, one that values the teachers working within it while also recognising the pressures teachers face on a daily basis.

The following session led by Barbara Comber resulted in my asking the question “Is my classroom a meeting place, a collective designed for learning?” Comber reinforced previous readings I have completed stating that we live in a society that has ‘poverty in affluence’. Many do not seem to understand that worldwide the majority of wealth is held in the hands of 10% of the population. Although this does not link to English specifically the concept is critical when considering the teaching of Humanities and trying to build understanding in young people of privilege and the responsibilities they need to understand. Another interesting point was Comber’s discussion on how an obsession with data can push the focus of learning towards performance.

Performance in tests does not equate to true learning although it cannot be discounted as one measure of achievement and has value. As an Assistant Principal in Literacy for 3 years I was able to collect, analyse, interpret and share data to build understanding of the literacy needs at our school and develop strategies for improvement. While this was critical to improving literacy by providing a baseline and measure of success there was always a concern that the data would become more important than the teaching. Currently we are testing using NAPLaN and PAT-R and PAT-M and using the data to determine areas for improvement. Even as I continue to collect and work with data an ongoing concern will continue to be linked to its potential misuse. We need to be aware as educators that tests present snapshots of how students are performing and need to be combined with a multitude of other information, or if the term is better suited, other data. Comber’s talk is one that will assist me in maintaining a balance.
Interestingly the next session led by Julie Arnold discussed how data results can be used to improve literacy in schools. I will be reading further articles by Fisher and Frey mentioned to try and understand how Arnold was able to use rubrics to analyse results and build literacy without losing sight of the whole student. As a school we have previously worked at genre mapping the curriculum across all faculties from Year 8-12, using the demands of the final year to guide teaching, learning and task design. Upon attending the session by Trish Weeks I believe the next step may be to map the literacy demands of Year 12 further using analysis of the language used in performance standards, rubrics and exam papers. This would need to start at leadership level and then work back through the faculty leaders and as a result will need to be discussed with colleagues before starting. I will schedule time to discuss this in Term 3 with other faculty leaders. Peter Nielsen from DECD then raised the question of what the future holds for our students. Considering that the careers that many will follow have yet to be invented it is valid to emphasise that as teachers we need to build a generation able to learn. We need to be cautious of ‘fossilisation’ as teachers and understand that just because something has been done a certain way it does not mean it should continue to be.

On that same day I was able to attend sessions that focused on the texts we teach at senior secondary levels and discuss the reasoning behind the choices made. Checking the reading lists from other states will allow me to discover and share other texts currently being used by them at the senior years and perhaps introduce these in our classes. A moment of déjà vu occurred as I listened to John Yandell explore Shakespeare and the teaching of Romeo and Juliet as currently I am teaching this with my Year 9 class. The use of a programme listed as a ‘developing tray’ is worth exploring as it may allow students at lower levels of literacy to access the curriculum. I have since discovered the pricing is reasonable and plan to buy this programme and trial it with a particular student who struggles to read at Reception level while in Year 8.

As the days continued I was privileged to be able to listen to Schoffner again, this time as she outlined the importance of those who taught us and the impact this can have on us as teachers. Schoffner went on to discuss the concepts raised in the media and literature related to images of teachers. From this I was pushed to question who had the greatest influence on me as a student and think about whether or not my teaching was in any way a mirror of how they taught. Yet again I was being challenged as to why and how I teach. It was almost overwhelming. Schoffner was followed by Misty Adoniou who expounded on literacy as meaning making. Through a series of images Adoniou was able to expound on the need to unpack the components of literature and yet remind us as teachers to not lose sight of the ‘big picture’. We can appreciate how language is built, how texts are composed but we must never lose the magic of what they truly are.

Truthfully I could continue to unpack the various sessions I attended over the days and expand on the incredible impact virtually every speaker had on me and my teaching but I believe it is also important to list some of the actions that I am now committed to as a result of the conference.

Charlotte Franz - Port Augusta Secondary School
**The Top 10 or do I mean the Top 10+????**

1. I will persevere to reflect on all aspects of how I teach, why I teach and what I can do to improve. This is a goal that I believe should be a central part of every teacher’s life. It sounds ‘possible’ but in reality when teaching and coping with the demands placed upon us this goal can become overwhelmed. I need to find a way to encourage those I work with and supervise to do this.

2. I want to work with my faculty and the broader school community to improve understanding of the importance of data for those who do not value it while encouraging those of us who gather and use it to not lose sight of the bigger picture.

3. On a more practical and specific level, go through reading lists from other states linked to the different levels of schooling, question and check how these could influence texts studied at our school.

4. Trial a software package in the hope it will provide a tool to assist low level students.

5. Contact both Misty and Melanie who have offered to provide resources linked to their work that I can use at our site to help teachers in other faculty areas deepen their understanding of literacy and strategies to use in their areas.

6. Maintain several professional relationships begun with teachers from across Australia and continue to exchange ideas.

7. Pursue my reading in literacy and educational change.

8. Return to study at a tertiary level and gain my Masters of Education in Literacy before beginning a PHD.

9. Take time to go back over my notes more than once or twice and pull out the ‘gems’ that I can implement at this time and put others aside but not discount them.

10. Make sure I share my learning with not just staff at our site but with people I talk to including parents and caregivers to try and build literacy understanding at a community level.

11. Somehow while doing this and all the other things the conference has inspired me to consider I MUST maintain a balanced lifestyle!

There are many other goals some of them small and some that at present I cannot even put into words. Overall however, I thank the TRB for making it possible for me to attend this conference. It has enriched my teaching and I will definitely be using it to work with others at our school. As a result of attending this year I am already finding ways to be able to attend the conference planned for Hobart in 2017. If the TRB is able to assist of course it would be wonderful but somehow I will get there as I now value this conference at a level I did not expect prior to attending.