After attending the National Conference for Teachers of English and Literacy from July 10 – 11, I have gained a more thorough understanding of the various content aspects of English and Literacy, and corresponding pedagogical strategies to support student understanding across various year levels. As a recent graduate, I have not attended a conference before. I was extremely keen to explore, listen and engage with the plethora of sessions on offer. After more thought, I decided to focus upon creative writing as an overarching subject for the presentations I attended.

As an amateur writer, I feel that creative writing has an important place within the classroom as a way to tap into your imagination and express oneself. I believe that students must be provided with more opportunities to be curious and engage more wholly with the world around them through writing creatively. Consequently ‘Turning on the Imagination: realising the wonder and power of creative writing’, presented by Robert Ewing, immediately caught my attention. Ewing explored several key points which appealed to me greatly.

Firstly, with writing often used by teachers as a summative measure of student success, it has become commodified, framed, packaged and driven. As a result, the freedom and pleasure of writing has become lost within the classroom.

Secondly, creative writing must be re-conceptualised as a literary art form to promote collaborative learning processes, risk-taking behaviours, problem solving and build resilience within students.

Thirdly, building upon the aforesaid life skills, writing enables students to ‘recover a sense of identity, power, safety, integrity, possibility, connection, abundance, compassion, autonomy, faith’ and therefore grow in a more positive way.

Drawing all of these ideas together, Ewing then presented “morning pages” as a pedagogical strategy for students to free their creativity. “Morning pages” is where students sit down for ten to fifteen minutes each day and write whatever comes to their minds in a journal/book. There is no particular structure or formality in any sense for the writing, though Ewing suggests that
whilst students adapt to this strategy and work on tuning in to their imagination, teachers suggest a theme for the day to help get students started. I very much look forward to using this strategy within my English classroom for all year levels, as it is simple, flexible and effective to include, it can be differentiated according to student needs and has numerous, holistic positive effects with long-term inclusion in the classroom for students.

I must admit that I am a teacher with a very close attachment to structure across all domains. I really enjoy lesson and unit planning to a high degree of detail, though I am quite flexible and thoroughly enjoy spontaneous learning. ‘Growing the classroom as a healthy habitat for wonder…’ by Kath Murdoch presented many key and practical strategies to an inquiry approach for learning and fostering students’ ability to commute with the world around them within the classroom.

With a focus upon the idea of ‘the plant grows itself. What you do is provide the conditions for growth’, Murdoch explored how to make the classroom a habitat for wonder via the metaphor of teacher as gardener. Murdoch listed numerous approaches to achieving this, with emphasis given to teachers explicitly adopting an inquiry stance. In essence, students interrogate, explore and consider issues and concepts within the classroom, where they are ‘fertilised’ to do so through literature which actively encourages wondering.

Harvesting the unexpected moment, such as exploring the causes and effects of an unexpected issue or event, keeping an “inquiry diary” within the classroom, where students write down their own wonderings for future whole-class investigating as they present themselves, as well as using resources like National Geographic or Wonderopolis, to prepare students for inquiry through provocation, likewise stimulate awe.

Repositioning the view of the everyday by examining it in closer detail and pollinating the classroom with passions for students is key for focusing on wonder too. Using open language with an emphasis upon questions rather than statements, and aerating these wonderings with time, means students are ideally placed to experience awe on a daily basis within the classroom. I look forward to slowly making the switch to an inquiry-based classroom for my teaching areas of English, Italian and History which facilitates wonder via these pedagogical strategies.
Introducing creativity of expression and argument to a formal essay was certainly an issue I was keen to explore further. In ‘Being creative with argument’, Tom Geynes investigated how teachers could facilitate students’ freedom when writing opinion-based articles. Geynes briefly reflected upon the feeling of constraint often expressed by students when they are writing about their opinion, before introducing a few steps for teachers to students’ enhance creativity whilst using personal voice.

Firstly, explicitly teaching argumentative grammar and skills opens up a shared language that students can use effectively. Secondly, collaboration regarding argument further deepens the shared discourse and increases students’ confidence levels. Thirdly, mapping students’ arguments allows for more individual feedback in a collaborative environment as well as meaningful planning and brainstorming. Using Rationale Online as a source for planning provides students with flexibility in expressing their opinions without becoming trapped within the arguably rigid structure of an essay.

I intend to use these steps and Rationale Online as a teaching approach to help students when writing opinion-based work, such as an argumentative essay, in a creative manner. This source and approach to writing is easily adaptable according to students’ needs, with appropriate scaffolding readily applicable. I really like how collaborative strategies are the focus for developing students’ arguments as this compliments an inquiry-based classroom with a focus on wonder quite well.

Using multimodal texts is another pedagogical strategy that I was very interested in learning more about. I feel that texts are underused as a potential resource for learning, but I was unsure of how else to use these effectively. In their presentation, ‘A chorus of listening: teaching and assessing creatively with multimodal texts’, Jon Callow and James Shivers discussed how texts can be used as a way for students to tune into themselves more deeply. This is referred to as a “chorus of listening”, where students focus on a particular passage of a class text and explore it further under guidance by the teacher. Students then create a “visual rhetoric” of the passage using the text as a canvas to record their reading experience. This is a very open assignment by design, so students have freedom of expression, can interpret at will and produce unique visual representations. By allowing students choice with their “visual rhetoric”, students explore multiple aspects of who they are, what type of reader they are and their understanding of the chosen text. Students also reveal themselves personally to their classmates and teacher,
fostering positive factors for group cohesion and respectful relationships.

From a teaching perspective though, I am able to gain a better understanding of where students are in relation to their reading experience and how they consider texts. As an avid reader, the ability to truly sink in to texts and interpret what the author is expressing is of utmost importance. It is likewise crucial for students to be able to consider how and why they interpret texts in that way, and express this process in a fun and engaging way. I intend to embed “visual rhetorics” within my classroom as it focuses upon critical and creative thinking of texts in an original way. I feel it will appeal universally across year levels, and can also be adequately adapted according to the specific ACARA English and Literacy requirements of each grade.

As a teacher, I am keen to include visual texts in my classroom. Like Paul Summer, in his address, “The Delirious Spectator, opening spaces in film studies”, I am also somewhat wary of the extreme focus upon film. I was interested in learning how to consider film in a different way. Indeed rather than solely focusing upon the techniques and their impacts upon students’ understanding, Summer addressed how to consider instead the numerous conflicts present within films and how these were constructed to inform our understanding. For example, all characters have ‘have attitudes, beliefs and dispositions which both reflect the culture from which each character comes and which enter into the conversation,’ meaning that all characters have differing cultures are in conflict.

These conflicts then result in a ‘space which has changed each of them in the process of being constructed.’ As a teacher, I am able to explore and acknowledge the world and orientation of the students in an inquiry way through provocation and challenging their perspectives. Alongside the conflict between characters, the conflicts between visuals and sounds as well as between images through editing, are the three leading spaces for exploration. I look forward to approaching film in my classroom through considering the influential factors of characters, visuals, sounds and imagery, which are then shaped to create a particular technique with specific effects.

Overall the National Conference for English and Literacy Teachers was extremely informative. I certainly left feeling quite overwhelmed but fulfilled with the sheer amount of information and range of subjects covered over the two days. My personal philosophy for teaching and pedagogical repertoire for English has certainly grown and developed immensely. As a recent

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graduate, I am focused upon growing and learning professionally as an English and Literacy teacher by taking every opportunity available to me. I fully intend to share my learning via my students by embedding these strategies within my personal pedagogy, and then putting these approaches into practice within the classroom. I also look forward to discussing, demonstrating and differentiating these practices with my co-workers as appropriate for student needs.