



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Demanding Space: Architects of Changeⁱ

The VATE State Conference in 2025 asserts the active role of language and of English teachers to advocate, uncompromisingly, for our profession as we fulfil and explore our responsibilities to our students, inspiring, confronting, challenging and unsettling them. The tense is continuous, enacting our ongoing and persistent commitment. The verb puns into an adjective, creating a relationship both fraught and mutually active and responsive. Physical and metaphysical space offers endless yet daunting possibilities which reject the mundanity and narrowness exemplified by such fads as generic lesson plans in favour of the actions of building, creating, and redesigning our pedagogical infrastructure so that 'every classroom must function as a space that can support advocacy for and with the ingenuity of young people.'ⁱⁱ

Boundless space offers boundless possibilities; it offers untrammelled creation of language and relationships, with a place at the table for all. We are all spacefarers, all subject to 'the restless spirit of endeavour'ⁱⁱⁱ, all building a 'language adequate to the spectacle'^{iv}. From the 'everyday advocacy'^v of the classroom teacher, to the position of the English teacher in the school, to our place in the broad community and cultural space, to wider political expression, we create a fertile self-sustaining, above all safe (thus, open to risk-taking and rebellion) space, ambitious for our students and our subject. By speaking in the active voice, we claim autonomy; we value agency; like Audre Lorde, we 'shift language into action'. Just as the vision of outer space allows for the relative positions of the universe to be apprehended, our 'demanding space' is inclusive and interconnected, all stories heard.

In 1991 Garth Boomer said that English teachers are 'being asked to produce resilient, flexible, adaptable, communicative, enterprising, inventive and cooperative thinkers'.^{vi} In 2025, we can add to this list, as our advocacy models, enables and equips our students to advocate, finding their own voices, turning the noun into a verb. 'The public narrative surrounding teachers is too often dismissive, demeaning, and just plain wrong.'^{vii} Similarly, Mockler deplores the 'messages of contempt toward teachers while also rendering their work simple and denying its complexity. All of which undermines teacher professionalism, normalising these attitudes for their readers.'^{viii} The title of Boomer's address, *Pragmatism, Radicalism and Idealism in English Teaching – On Resistance*, speaks to us today. Faced with the hypernormalisation of political dysfunction and personal powerlessness^{ix}, it is crucial to resist, to speak, to act, to defeat the 'ignorant armies [which] clash by night', but instead 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield'.^x

Lorde argues that silence is a form of violence; VATE 2025 is, like Prospero's island, 'full of noise', impossible to ignore. VATE's voice is a weapon of empowerment, hope and imagination, exemplified in Barrina South's poem, 'white margins'^{xi}:

from white margins

Blak words demand

space

each word, paragraph, sentence

uncovers

locates

place

ⁱ Curators of the University of Melbourne's exhibition, '65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art', Judith Ryan and Shanyssa McConville coined the phrase, "Indigenous architects of change" providing the trope for part of our title. Read more about the exhibition launch in the [National Indigenous Times](#).

ⁱⁱ Garcia, A., & Mirra, N. (2024). Advocacy: A Malleable Approach to Civic Transformation alongside Students and Families. *Voices from the Middle*, 31(4), 15-17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harvey, S. (2024). *Orbital*. Vintage. p.133.

^{iv} Wood, J. (2023). Circling the planet, looking for God. *The New Yorker*. <https://bit.ly/43VUeFL>

^v Everyday Advocacy. *Shifting the public narrative in literacy education*. <https://www.everydayadvocacy.org/>

^{vi} Boomer, G. (1991). Pragmatism, Radicalism and Idealism in English Teaching: On Resistance. *Idiom*, 26(3). 3-14.

^{vii} Fleischer, C. & Garcia, A. (2020). *Everyday Advocacy: Teachers who change the literacy narrative*. <https://bit.ly/4jIXmuf>

^{viii} Mockler, N. (2024). 'The way we think about teachers': Media representations of teachers and their work in Australia. *Journal of Professional Learning*. <https://bit.ly/4mX8JSn>

^{ix} Matei, A. (2025, 23 May). Systems are crumbling – but daily life continues. The dissonance is real. *The Guardian*. <https://bit.ly/4jMFdMi>

^x Boomer, G. (1991). Pragmatism, Radicalism and Idealism in English Teaching: On Resistance. *Idiom*, 26(3). 3-14.

^{xi} South, B. (2025). white margins. *Idiom*, 61(1). 7.