

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of purple, spiky plants, possibly a species of cactus or succulent. The plants have long, thin, needle-like leaves and small, rounded, fleshy stems. The colors range from deep purple to magenta. Overlaid on this image are several semi-transparent geometric shapes: a large purple triangle in the upper left, a smaller orange triangle to its left, a large red triangle in the center, and a blue triangle in the lower left. The text is placed within these shapes.

# Generative Conversations for Creative Learning

*Reimagining Literacy Education  
and Understanding*

**GLORIA LATHAM  
AND ROBYN EWING**

**Creativity,  
Education  
and  
the Arts**



# Creativity, Education and the Arts

Series editor

Anne Harris

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

Melbourne, Australia

This series emerges out of recent rapid advances in creativity- and arts-informed research in education that seeks to reposition creativity studies within (and in conversation with) education as a multi- and interdisciplinary field.

This series takes as its starting point the interrelationship between arts-based research and a growing neuroscientific, cultural and economic discourse of creativity and creative industries, and the need for education to play a larger role in these expanding discourses. It also takes as a priori an invitation to creativity scholars to move more robustly into theorizing the work of arts- and creativity-based research work, bridging a historical gap between ‘science’ and ‘art’, between ‘theoretical’ and ‘applied’ approaches to research, and between qualitative and quantitative research paradigms.

The following are the primary aims of the series:

- To publish creativity research and theory in relation to education (including schools, curriculum, policy, higher education, pedagogy, learning and teaching, etc.).
- To put education at the heart of debates on creativity, re-establish the significance of creativity for learning and teaching and development analyses, and forge links between creativity and education.
- To publish research that draws on a range of disciplinary and theoretical lenses, strengthening the links between creative and arts education and geographies, anthropology, creative industries, aesthetics and philosophy, history, and cultural studies.
- To publish creativity research and theory with an international scope that explores and reflects the current expansion of thought and practice about global flows, cultural heritage, and creativity and the arts in education.

More information about this series at  
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Gloria Latham • Robyn Ewing

# Generative Conversations for Creative Learning

Reimagining Literacy Education and  
Understanding

palgrave  
macmillan

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*To our children and grandchildren for their love, their imaginations,  
their inspiration and their endless storying...  
(Anyaa, Ella, Tilda, Tasha, Marion and Elliot) (Belinda, Sarah,  
Josh, Timothy, Jordan, Asher, Noah and Jake)*

*We wish to acknowledge  
The Aboriginal system of knowledge, art and human storytelling  
is not only the world's oldest earth science and environmentalism,  
it's a complex expression of the wonder of the journey of the human  
mind, as people try to fathom our relationship with the cosmos,  
our place in the bigger scheme of things.  
Jeff McMullen, 2009, introducing an Australian Aboriginal  
art exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales*

## FOREWORD

*Generative Conversations* is all about creativity in teaching, learning and in the use of language to foster shared inquiry and meaning making. Throughout the chapters of this innovative and engaging book, the authors Robyn Ewing and Gloria Latham show us how to engage in the kinds of conversations that encourage extended exchanges, authentic dialogue and the co-creation of new ideas and understandings. The work is deeply grounded in Gloria and Robyn's extensive background and expertise in literacy learning, children's literature, process drama and creative pedagogy, work that is internationally recognised and valued. Here, they provide a wealth of ideas to promote creative and critical thinking, and they open up new possibilities for teaching and learning inside and outside classrooms, and at all levels of education.

The chapters of the book take us into the minds of these two creative conversationalists: minds that are filled to the rafters with ideas for creative teaching and learning, good books to read, links to explore and ways to make learning exciting for everyone involved. They show us how we can all live more creatively by enhancing the conversations we have in our daily lives, so that we can learn from and with our colleagues, family and friends. They model for us the processes of travelling together through uncharted territory, of bridging old understandings and new insights and of pursuing a non-linear, innovative approach to the generation of new understandings.

In *Generative Conversations* Robyn and Gloria present a re-visioned approach to literacy teaching and learning. They weave a rich tapestry of ideas, resources and practices for the creation of classrooms where arts

activities and quality literature are used to stimulate students' curiosity, sense of wonder and engagement in the curriculum. In these classrooms, students play an active role in their own inquiries and through a range of arts experiences—literature, drawing, poetry, dance, dramatic play, music and dialogue—they learn about themselves, about lives that are different to their own and about the world around them. Their voices and questions are valued and nurtured, and they are encouraged to pursue their own individual interests and passions as well as what they need to learn in common.

Students learn to tell their stories, to enter imaginatively into the stories of others, and to use language to learn about complex issues and concepts such as courage and resilience, friendships and relationships, self-knowledge, and empathy and compassion for others. They are encouraged to develop their imaginations and intuitions as well as their intellects, and to harness them together to use what they know to learn what they need to know, in order to create lives where they are fulfilled as whole human beings and as engaged, compassionate citizens.

The ability to collaborate in generative conversations is a relevant and valuable topic in our current world where, as Gloria and Robyn point out, most of our conversations are mediated by screens and phones and where we are in danger of losing the art of face-to-face conversation and storytelling, of reading the meanings that are embedded in bodily gestures and movements and of creating contexts for interacting narratives. It is within the shared experiences and conversations we have with others, and in the vicarious experiences we have through the arts and literature, that we learn about ourselves and each other, about the world of feelings as well as of ideas, of dealing with ambiguity and different perspectives, of recognising different ways of knowing and being and of re-creating our knowledge and ourselves.

It is significant to note that for the past two decades, the importance of narrative, storytelling and reciprocal conversations is being recognised across the disciplines and in professional programmes in higher education. Prospective educators and practitioners are being taught to hear the stories others tell from these individuals' own unique perspectives, to engage in conversations where they are responsive to their meanings and to engage in shared inquiry. It is acknowledged that at all levels of education, the arts and humanities play a vital role in the development of individuals' creativity, problem-solving abilities, academic achievement and leadership potential. Valuable and vital also are the kinds of conversations where ind-



individuals nurture each other's creativity and understandings and where they learn from and with each other. We need examples of how to engage in these kinds of conversations, and Robyn and Gloria have given us some fine ones here.

*Generative Conversations* is an innovative, literary, scholarly and engaging book. It is a book to own, to read and re-read, to use as a resource and to give to others as a gift, knowing what a gift it is.

Professor Emeritus  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education  
at the University of Toronto

Mary Beattie

## ANNE HARRIS' SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

There are many things to love about this book, and I'm so very pleased to welcome it into the *Creativity, Education and the Arts* Palgrave family. *Generative Conversations for Creative Learning: Re-imagining Literacy Education and Understanding* by Gloria Latham and Robyn Ewing begins with a kind of promise—both structural and conceptual—that storytelling and/or conversation has the onto-epistemological power to not only describe worlds but to conjure them. They describe this book as a 'talking book.' They invoke, straight from the beginning, a range of iconic arts education scholars including Madeline Grumet, who we learn describes curriculum as the 'story we want to tell our children,' a conceptual borrowing that situates this major contribution in its intersectional home, between family, education and creative arts. The co-authors then waste no time in establishing the vast and multitudinous tracks along which they (and we) will wander.

In order to take us with them, Latham and Ewing invoke the metaphor of the 'journey,' of wandering, of discovery in order to describe the way they see creative education and a lifetime in curious classrooms. How lucky we are to be fellow travellers! They highlight the importance of place, both literal and figurative: the place where creative education can occur, the place we wish to inhabit and to leave for our children, students and those who will follow us.

The primary audience for this book are pre-service and in-service teachers, yet importantly the co-authors lead with their identities as mothers, grandmothers, creative and curious people, a humanist approach that informs all of their curricular and pedagogical expertise. Their primary

goal, often repeated throughout this innovative text, is a thoroughly collaborative approach to scholarship and learning, a team which extends out to include readers as well, in order to re-imagine literacy education through creative dialogue between readers, teachers, parents, children and the wider community. Through their commitment to these collaborative and holistic practices, Latham and Ewing offer new formulations of this work, such as 'talking classrooms' and attention to 'big questions.'

In this deceptively simple series of 'everyday exchanges' and exemplars of best practice and student-generated works, these two master educators plumb the depths of creative education, literacies, arts, curiosity and the contemporary obsession with standard-based testing and standardised curricula. Their conversations here—the *why* of them but also the *how*—reveal masterful reflections and advice on the nature of good teaching, the purpose of education that goes far beyond the outcome-based orientations of many education agendas and expert knowledge on teacher mentoring and professional learning. They relentlessly remind us that the key to both creative innovation and holistic learning pleasure can be found in questions like: 'What helps us move beyond these taken-for-granted parts of the school system and change these patterns?'—the kinds of queries their careers are well known for.

Each chapter opens with a statement or question regarding the enquiry that will be pursued in that 'conversation,' such as: 'How do we go about re-imagining literacy learning as parents and as teachers?' They incorporate up-to-the-minute concepts/topics like *post-truth* and *fake news* and tie them to both current events and historical game-changing theorists, practitioners, writers, artists and philosophers. Because of their lifetime of experience in the intersecting areas of pedagogy, creativity, arts, literacy and young children, the co-authors deftly interweave considerations of questioning and the ways in which we are trained 'into' or 'out of' things such as sport, arts, maths, a whole range of areas of endeavour. But they also know from their multiple perspectives the power of adult or expert feedback on vulnerable and curious learners: one harsh word can scar someone forever and put them off places of enquiry for a lifetime. To this end, they critically interrogate the role of creative teachers.

In several of the chapters, they drill down into specific areas of expertise/mastery and the roles these practices serve in a broader creative and literacy education landscape. They draw on a breathtakingly vast breadth of sources and knowledge systems in discussing first the arts in classrooms, but more specifically on drama, literacy and storytelling in education and

human development. For these co-authors, the arts and arts exploration were intrinsically part of their call to—and orientation in—education as a passion and as a career. They draw on their own first-hand personal knowledge and emotional/intellectual understanding of how creative endeavour changes lives and how teachers bring that to any and all children, not just students with ‘promise.’

Each chapter shares—through the dialogues—not only expert teacher knowledge but also the rich and personal tapestries of how these master teachers came to education through the birth of their children, through twists and turns in their lives and economic as well as personal necessities and curiosities. It is a rich accounting in which the passion they both still feel, after stellar careers, shines through on each page. Educators and scholars like these are few and far between: their honesty is inspiring, from Ewing’s admission about still feeling nervous after so many years and Latham’s insights into a range of storytelling-related topics, the effects amplified by the conversational and personal register, is profound.

They end with a reminder that ‘we are all connected through story’... [and that]

It is clear from our conversations that we must continue to advocate for empathy and compassion in our classrooms, embedding rich arts processes and experiences in all learning to ensure that children’s curiosity and imaginations are never stifled...Throughout history the Arts have always been important as a response to oppression in all its forms and this is never more salient as in the present.

I couldn’t agree more. I commend this book to you, readers, with incredible gratitude and appreciation for the experts among us: practitioners, artists, master teachers and the students who helped train them. Ewing and Latham are two of the best, and I know you will enjoy this book as much as I have.

Melbourne, Australia  
March 27, 2017

Anne Harris

## PROLOGUE: AN INVITATION

You are invited to venture into uncertain times with us, to get lost, wander, find your way and hopefully at some point on the journey transform your thinking, your feelings and ultimately your practice. If you believe, as we and many other parents, grandparents, teachers and caregivers do, that our lives and learning should be driven by curiosity, imagination, artistry, creative problem-solving and storying so evident in young children from birth then please join our conversations. If you're not sure of the way, remember we are explorers too. Together we can make a start based on our past, current and imagined future storied lives.

We all want to leave education in a better place for future generations. What seems in contention in many contemporary education systems, however, is what is deemed the *better place*. What beliefs do we foster and how are they manifest in our personal professional practices?

In this 'talking book' we hope to challenge and interrogate our beliefs about education and propose alternative ways of visualising teaching and learning. For instance, we will explore the very nature of curriculum. The **Australian Curriculum** <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/> describes curriculum with 'content descriptions and achievement standards, what students should be taught and achieve, as they progress through school.'

Alternatively, many educators view curriculum in far more humanistic terms. **Jerry Harste** (2012) believes curriculum to be a metaphor for the way we want to live our lives and the people we want to be. And **Madeline Grumet** (1981 Winter) adds that curriculum is the story we want to tell our children. **Maxine Greene** (1995) speaks of a curriculum of social

imagination where people awaken to see, to feel, to wonder but also to know what is possible and then to act.

How do you view curriculum?

How do you view the importance of conversations in learning?

While the primary audience for this book is pre-service and in-service teachers, we hope that parents, grandparents and other members of the school community join our conversations so that we can explore together, make discoveries together and hopefully share our consistent beliefs and practices with children.

Throughout our conversations and as each one draws to a close, we may pose a question or two for ourselves and for you the reader to respond to. We also welcome the questions and thoughts you generate. For this purpose, we have set up a website so that the threads of our ideas can continue. Go to: <https://www.lathamewinggenerativeconversations.com>.

Many books and articles on oral communication begin with **James Britton's** (1970) enduring and evocative metaphor, '*Floating on a sea of talk*' or '*Reading and writing float on a sea of talk*,' heralding talk's fundamental importance to our thinking, our learning and our everyday lives. Yet *floating* on a sea of talk also denotes a gentle, relaxed ease; a position we will suggest needs to be challenged at times. It is the very nature of the talk that occurs in classrooms and in homes that we will address in this talking book. It is not merely the vastness of the sea of talk that we wish to explore but also its depth, its turbulence, the uncertain and constant changes. These can place conversationalists on heightened alert, listening, thinking, problem-solving, navigating the predicaments and wonders that potentially confront our ideas and understandings.

The metaphor of a sea also evokes the poetic voice, the language that brings us far closer to the things around us and to one another. We hope to explore and share the expressive use of language that makes words sing but also the kind of interactive **dancing language** Hart & Risley (1995) that flows between a parent and baby and the language that invites and fosters face-to-face compelling conversations.

*In the girl with the brown crayon*, **Vivian Paley** (1997), an early childhood educator, describes what she needs in the classroom. She says:

I need the intense preoccupation of children and teachers inventing new worlds as they learn to know each other's dreams. To invent is to come alive.

We agree! The way to foster conversations where children of all ages invent, wonder, imagine and question will be explored here. We have chosen to do this through a series of conversations about carefully selected literature and arts processes and experiences that can help us delve more deeply into our own and others' understandings about ourselves, the world and our place in it.

Children are fuelled with the desire to talk about and question their experiences with family members, teachers and peers—almost anyone nearby that is a willing listener and fellow explorer. They want to share ideas with people who offer them respect, time, space and willingness to story, to imagine together, to engage in generative conversations. We are reminded of their wisdom throughout the recently released **Scottish Children's Parliament Report: *School should be a joyful place.***

In the following conversations, we invite you to take part in reimagining joyful literacy teaching and learning by employing generative, ongoing talk between you and other teachers and parents, children and the wider community.

(The researchers coined the phrase 'Dancing Language' to refer to important conversations in which the parent and child are engaged in a genuine dialogue).

Hart and Risely's famous longitudinal study in the 1980s of 42 families of professional, working-class and low-income Americans. The researchers recorded all utterances and interactions of parents and young children beginning with children at 7 months and ending at 3 years. Children of talkative parents heard almost 45 million words whereas with less talkative parents, the children heard 30 million words. The talk was divided into two groups, Business Talk (instructional) and Extra Talk they called '*language dancing*' (*face-to-face talk that began with phrases like: 'What if...' 'Do you remember...?' 'Wouldn't it be better if...'*)

Listen to Todd Risely: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0J4yNRaPx24>

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# CREATIVITY, EDUCATION AND THE ARTS

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Gloria Latham and Robyn Ewing

## REFERENCE

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## Conversation around the book's beginning and central themes

**Gloria** How did our talking book come about, Robyn? I know it began in conversations (the way all sweet ideas get furthered and deepened), but how did it get a form and direction?

**Robyn** I can't remember where we began the conversation Gloria—maybe at coffee during an ALEA (Australian Literacy Educators Association) conference in Melbourne back in 2011. We discovered that we had shared concerns about where schooling was heading, and we voiced our worries about what was happening for our grandchildren. We quickly found that we were 'kindred spirits' a bit like Anne Shirley and Diana in **Lucy Maud Montgomery's** (1908/2008) *Anne of Green Gables*. Since then we have just kept talking. And as we've talked, we've shared our love for stories, for literature and learning and built on each other's ideas in wonderful ways. We've sent each other important links, recommended books to read, shared snippets of our joy as parents and grandmothers. Sometimes it seems that our ideas just flow into each other's. ... I love that about our conversations.

**Gloria** I love that as well. The mention of *Anne of Green Gables* reminded me of Tasha, my younger daughter, adopting one of Anne's tortured lines which she performed in highly dramatic fashion: 'My life is a perfect

graveyard of buried hopes.' She would say this whenever she experienced some nine-year-old problem!

Stories have the ability to fuel and enrich language to improve the quality of our conversations.

And children love a storyteller or reader who changes voices to embody the characters, a storyteller who uses her entire being in the telling—the nuances of the eyes, the voice, the gestures—all oozing pleasure in her bones. While telling a story, she may play music or make sounds, sing and paint mental images. Or she may paint magic with only her bodily craft as a storyteller. We have the power to create other times, other worlds and allow us (children, family and teachers) to live inside the skin of the stories in order to better understand ourselves, other times, other places, other feelings, other lives. Robyn, do you tell stories as well as read them?

**Robyn** Yes I do Gloria, all the time. I guess sometimes we don't realise that we live our lives by telling stories and we shape them for the listener depending on what focus we have for that particular audience. **Jane Yolen** (1981/1991) believes that stories lean on stories, art on art. Children love adults to tell them stories 'with their mouth,' as one grandson sometimes says, or *from their whole beings* as well as from books. And even now I love to listen to a story told or read well.

**Gloria** I do as well. I love the feeling of warmth that enfolds you when your child or grandchild or someone else's child leans in to nuzzle against your side to get nearer to you—to get nearer to the story. It's a feeling of being in one skin. Whether told, read, moving or solely imagined, stories can evoke wonder and curiosity. **Ian Leslie** (2014) reminds us that storytellers understand the importance of information gaps in creating curiosity this 'What will happen next?' 'Who will we see next?' So curiosity and surprise are often created by how we build anticipation, what we show and what we hide and what is left out.

**Robyn** In our conversations together, as well as sharing our children and grandchildren's stories, we also talked about the joys and frustrations we've experienced in our educational institutions. And we asked each other some fairly challenging questions. Although we live and wonder in different cities in Australia, we were both trying to discover ways to make sense of our experiences. We were also exploring ways to further and