The teaching of English in schools around the world has become too focused on basic literacy and examinations, and a new approach is necessary, according to an international group of teachers and academics.

The group, which has set up a global network of educators to reinvigorate English teaching, says new ways of teaching English are necessary to inspire students and encourage creativity.

The educators argue that schools could blend the teaching of English subjects with classes in visual arts and drama and reduce the emphasis on its instrumental role in schools.

The Arts, English and Literacy Education Research Network was formed by academics and teachers from countries across the globe, including Australia, the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand to overcome the increasing focus on basic literacy and exams that has emerged in the past 10 years.

"We would like to encourage a more holistic and cohesive view of how creative arts can work in the curriculum," said network co-ordinator Jacqueline Manuel.

Dr Manuel, a senior lecturer in English at the University of Sydney, said the network brought together teachers, researchers, policymakers and others in the fields of the creative arts and English.

"In America especially, English has become a dumping ground for testing and has led to the idea that literacy and English are synonymous," she said.

"A great industry has grown up around coaching kids for exams, especially for those in the final years of secondary school but what is being lost is the fostering of ideas of imagination and creativity."

The consequence of this view of English as simply a means of improving students' literacy so they are better suited to the workforce has led to a crisis in the humanities faculties in universities around the world.

Dr Manuel said those involved in the network shared these concerns and wanted an international response to put English "back on the map - as a subject that is about more than preparing students for the world of work".

The goal was to foster, support and disseminate research in arts, English and literacy education, "We aim to promote excellence in teaching in these domains across all educational sectors," she said.

Dr Manuel said there was a renaissance in English teaching in the 1960s but this had been overtaken by claims that schools were failing to teach literacy. The result was an emphasis on basic literacy and a shift from teaching literature with its capacity to engage pupils' imagination.

She said English had become too instrumental whereas the world of the 21st century needed young people who had problem-solving skills that the humanities could provide.

The interdisciplinary nature of the network would strengthen the relationships among arts, English and literacy researchers in university faculties and beyond, Dr Manuel said.