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Paper Title Learning to Teach Contemporary Literacies: Preservice Teachers and School Students Coconstruct Multimodal Texts

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Learning to teach contemporary literacies: Pre-service Teachers' accounts of working with school age students to co-construct multimodal texts

Abstract

Pre-service Teachers (PsTs) begin their teacher education courses with their own understandings of what constitutes literacy, and how it should be taught. These do not always align with contemporary understandings of literacies despite the fact that many PsTs come from the generation that has grown up with smart devices and social media. PsTs need effective opportunities to learn about literacies and practice literacy teaching. This paper is informed by the close examination of a task, which involves PsTs and students in schools, in the co-construction of multimodal texts. Data were gathered from PsTs and examined through a practice architectures lens. Findings suggest the tasks examined are highly successful in extending PsTs' understandings of contemporary literacies and how these may be taught.

Objectives or purposes

Quality teaching is integral to student success, (Hattie, 2009) and a teaching professional requires specialist knowledge of content, the learner and teaching processes (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p. xiii). Undergraduate PsTs come to Charles Sturt University (CSU), Australia, with their own understandings of literacies and how they should be taught. These understandings are often conservative, print based, and do not reflect contemporary understandings of literacies, despite many of the PsTs having grown up with constant access to smart devices and social media (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012). To become effective teachers of literacies, PsTs need to develop: their understanding of contemporary literacies; skills for getting to know, and building on what students '*know and can do*'; and a range of flexible approaches to teaching literacies.

The innovative task discussed here, affords PsTs with the opportunity to 'study and practice teaching' at the same time (Reid, 2011, p.308) as they engage with learners between the ages of 5 and 8 years. The task is creative, caters for different abilities, offers choice, involves collaborative learning and emphasises both process and product. The obvious outcomes are co-constructed multi-modal texts. However, PsTs' also develop increased understandings of teaching, contemporary literacies, and how to identify and build on what students 'know and can do'.

Theoretical framework

This paper draws on the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Author, et.al. 2013) to examine the work of PsTs as they develop, through the task described, their understandings of literacies, and teaching and learning in contemporary times. It has been argued, (see for examples, Green, 2009; Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; and Schatzski, 2002, 2010) that practices (for example, teaching and learning) are supported by idiosyncratic prerequisites which afford and limit the particular interconnected activities, language and relationships which together constitute a practice. As such, practice is influenced by the language or sayings of that practice *(cultural-discursive arrangements)*, the activity or doings of the practice *(material-economic arrangements)* and the relatings encountered in practice *(social-political arrangements)*. Practice theory seeks to understand practice and learning practice in the sites within which they happen *as* they happen; that is, the existential and ontological dimension of practice (Kemmis, 2012). In university classes, PsTs may be introduced to new ways of thinking but it is the translation of these new ways of thinking into practice that can prove difficult.

In contemporary times 'Literacy' has morphed into 'literacies' as students are increasingly exposed to communication tools and situations that are multimodal rather than exclusively linguistic, (Hill & Nichols, 2006; Jewitt, 2006). Understandings of new literacies were pioneered by the New London Group (1996) and have been extended throughout the past 15 years (see, for example, Kalantzis, Cope & Cloonan, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel 2003, 2004, 2007, 2011). However, understandings of new literacies are not common among PsTs when they arrive at CSU. Nor do they see technology and literacy as integral to one another. The opportunity to study and practice literacy teaching at one and the same time, is afforded by the task discussed here.

Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

The task discussed is embedded within a literacy subject in an undergraduate teacher education course at CSU, Australia, and is set up in the following way:

- University classes leading up to and running alongside the task are focused on language and literacy development, the reading and writing processes, children's

literature (including multimodal texts), literacies in the 21st century, and the connectivity between technology and literacies.

- PsTs are matched with a school student who becomes their buddy. The pairs work together on four occasions; three at the school and one at the university. At the first two visits, the pairs spend time together getting to know one another, within the school environment. They talk, read books (including multimodal texts), play games etc as the PsTs get to know the literacy development, technology competence and interests of their students. The class teachers provide examples of texts read, and written by the students. In classes at the university PsTs work together discussing their observations and learning.

- The third visit involves a morning where the pairs explore CSU's wetlands. They play, talk, sing etc and both take photos of their adventures (The PsTs guiding their student). Once enough raw material has been collected (ideas, notes, photos) the pairs download their photos and begin to craft their multimodal texts. Many students choose to include their own drawings. By the end of the day, a draft of the text is complete; illustrations are taking form and sound files created. The final text will be more sophisticated than that which the student could create without assistance, but the student must be able to read the text with minimal assistance.

- The PsTs take three weeks to edit and publish the text. They are encouraged to seek editorial advice from peers and hand in a draft for checking. They upload the finished text to the subject webpage.

- A fourth (celebratory) visit to the school includes the presentation of a copy of the multimodal text to the student to take home and a copy to the class teacher.

Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials

The task has been honed over four years in response to evaluations from 240 PsTs, three schools, eight teachers, three academics and an educational designer. Data for this paper are drawn from the feedback from the 2012 cohort (70 PsTs) and unstructured online surveys conducted with12 volunteer PsTs several months after the task was completed. Examples of the multimodal texts, will be shared in the actual presentation.

Substantiated conclusions

1) Through the task described, PsTs begin to learn about *the activity or doings of the practice and the relatings required* of literacy teaching and literacy learners.

> *I learnt about putting my teaching philosophy into practice and how it functioned in a real world context. I learnt that it was different to how I had imagined . . . skills or character traits such as flexibility, perseverance and patience during the one-on-one components of the task became just as important as the preparation and planning . . .* (Emily).

PsTs discover the benefits of the creative nature of the task; how they are able to modify the task to cater for different student abilities, interests and development. They discuss how this is contrary to some of the whole class *one size fits all* activities observed in some classrooms. They also begin to understand the theory/practice relationship.

> *I realised there were so many ways to approach the task, and that the most important aspect was igniting our creativity and seeing where this would lead us. At times it is essential to 'go with the flow', viewing the world through the eyes of young children* (Liz). (N.B. all names are pseudonyms)

> *From this exercise we were able to recognise and understand literacy theory . . . realistically and practically and develop new skills* (Rona).

Some PsTs realize that it is okay to learn from their students,

> *This task began with Sally being the learner and I, the teacher. However, there were times that Sally became the teacher and I, the learner* (Margaret,

PsTs' understandings of contemporary students and their preconceived ideas of schools, students and teaching are questioned, although more experiences of this kind may be needed to permanently shift these.

> *I learnt about the way multimodal texts help teachers scaffold students' understandings of traditional literacy. I also learnt about the way multimodal texts motivate students by being accessible and relevant to the students' own contexts and also how they promote creative thinking* (Erin).

2) PsTs begin to learn *the language or sayings and activity or doings* of contemporary literacies, including the semiotic systems, the nature of the multimodal writing process, and the role of technology in contemporary literacies. The most obvious shift in thinking relates to the complexity of contemporary literacies.

Literacy is far more complex than I had realised . . . I thought we would just learn about reading, writing, spelling and grammar but . . . literacies are so much more than I thought . . . (Carly).

. . . there are many ways of learning literacy. . . there are many opportunities that offer learning experiences, inside and outside the classroom; we can use a child's interest to engage their learning; and we can engage a child's learning with our own interests. (Jeremy)

PsTs develop the skills to create multimodal texts. They also discern that technology and literacies are inter-related, that technology is a strong motivator, and that their students are often very computer literate.

It had never occurred to me that technology could be used by young children to create stories but I noticed how engaged Mia was . . . Mia had prior knowledge of how to operate a camera . . . children seem to have no fear of technology and just 'have a go' . . . This task has shown me that I need not be afraid of allowing young children to use technology . . . They often know more about technology than adults (Rona).

3) PsTs begin to learn the *doings and relatings* needed to build on what students 'know and can do'.

. . . he knew about things that I had no idea about (Jane).

I was always worried about not knowing where to start. Now I know it isn't a 'given'. You don't do it just because they are in grade 1 or grade 2. You have to find out what they know. . .and can do. I know how to do that now (Sam).

Others resolve the challenges associated with working with some students.

. . . it was initially difficult to gain my student's engagement but, when I incorporated one of his strong interests (Pokémon) into the task he became very engaged and involved (Carly).

Through interrogation of PsTs responses to this innovative task we can see how they are beginning to learn about the '*activities or doings*', '*language or sayings*' and '*relatings*' that are integral to the practice of literacies teaching in current times.

Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

The examination of the outcomes of the task directly informs the global debate which focuses on the efficacy of pre-service teacher education. Importantly, this study demonstrates how PsTs can begin to learn the specialist knowledge of the professional teacher (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012) through tasks which directly connect 'study and practice' (Reid, 2011). The paper illustrates the importance of connecting theoretical propositions made within teacher

education programs with authentic interactions between PsTs and students in classrooms.The challenge for teacher educators is ensuring that preparation for teaching is developed across courses as a theoretical proposition, which guides teacher educators and PsT's understandings and thus their bases for efficacy in enactment. In making these claims, the paper invites further exploration of practice development and in particular, core practices of teaching and learning. Of further significance is the application of practice architectures as the lens for examining the theory/practice nexus that is the challenge of teacher education.

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