As students enter the later years of secondary English classes, the expectation is that they are able to move beyond the content of the text to critically analyse an author’s intent, style and purpose as well. However, the question has to be raised – are we teaching kids how to do this in the Early and Middle Years?

How are we providing teaching and learning opportunities for our students to understand, analyse and articulate what and how (intended or unintended) the impact that the author’s craft has on them as readers, and ultimately, how they can then apply this understanding to themselves as strategic writers? This paper outlines strategies for teaching critical literacy through author’s craft, style and intent through whole class novel studies.

This approach has been a component of the Middle Years Literacy focus in the Pascoe Park and Sunbury Innovations and Excellence Clusters where Kate Story and Marg Sneddon are the respective Cluster Educators. Shane Calthorpe, Margo Edgar and Ghiran Byrne are practising classroom teachers working with Kate on reshaping curriculum and pedagogy in their Middle Years classrooms.

Teaching Author’s Craft

Teaching students to critically view and respond to a writer’s craft provides readers with an insight into the world of the writer; to peer through the window of the author’s mind and to try to understand the workings and intentions that make words much more than ink marks on paper.

When author’s craft is referred to, it means the explicit teaching for understanding of choices authors make as writers and the strategies they apply for particular and intended impact on the reader. For example: What tense does the author use? Does the author combine more than one tense? Does the author have a sense of humour? Can we determine the author’s intent? Is there an opinion or message that the author is sharing with us? What research would the author have to do to be able to write a book like this? Does the author provide clues to help us understand the meaning? Has the author combined more than one storyline? What kind of language features does the author use? Why has the text been set up and structure in this particular way? Are we aware of what the author is doing; for example, are they teasing us, or making us wait when we are in suspense? Who is the author, and are we interested in them as a person? What are their background, interests and hobbies? Are we getting to know the author through reading their writing? Can we emulate the style of a particular author?

Teaching author’s craft means providing students with opportunities to think beyond content and to develop strategies to comprehend the impact the writer has on them as a reader and to recognise the choices made by the writer in constructing their piece. Therefore, the teaching focus is not in this case on the content of the text but how the writing style, structure and elements of the text work together, and how the reader works at interpreting the text.

In teaching our students ‘how’ to read and ‘how’ to write we need to be teaching them ‘how’ to think like readers and writers. Providing students with a language to have conversations about their writing is essential. These conversations need to move beyond simply discussing the content to being able to have ‘accountable dialogue’ about the author’s craft.

Analysing author’s craft is a skill that can be applied to all types of texts, for all student age groups, and that gives further meaning to the students’ understanding of themselves as readers and to the connection created between the reader and writer. In understanding an author’s purpose and writing style, students can then...
transfer these understandings of how texts work to their own writing.

Again, it is the explicit teaching of author’s craft that our Middle Years students require through structured mini lessons, modelling, shared reading and writing experiences, to then be able to independently practice strategies involved with analysing and responding to texts.

By explicit teaching of reading strategies, we have found that students have made the transition into reflecting on strategies good writers use. They can make connections to their own reading by having accountable conversations about what they do as they read; however, being able to articulate what they do as a writer doesn’t come as fluidly without the structured support and exposure to the reading strategies first, and connections to an author’s craft. Through this they start to see that authors write with a purpose and use explicit strategies to capture a reader.

Reflections from students

As a result of our reading focus using Carole Wilkinson’s novel *Dragonkeeper*, Grade 4/5 students at Coburg North Primary School identified strategies that good writers (in this case Carole Wilkinson) used to enhance their texts:

- Good writers use juicy words and colourful language to make their writing interesting to the reader.
- Good writers use language in clever ways, like metaphors and similes, to keep the reader interested.
- Good writers have little tricks they use when publishing – like indented paragraphs – to hook the reader in and make them want to read more.
- Good writers plant clues throughout the text to keep the reader interested and asking questions.
- Good writers use descriptive language to help the reader create pictures in their heads as they read.
- Good writers develop characters all the way through the text, and make the reader feel like they know the character.
- Good writers write in a way that makes the reader ask questions of the text and make connections (text to text, text to self and text to world.)

The students supported the identified author strategies with specific evidence from the text and could articulate exactly what impact it had on them as readers, and why.

Approaches to teaching author’s craft in middle years classrooms

Explicit teaching in the workshop model

Teaching students how to detect and analyse author’s craft cannot be simply something we hope our kids will pick up as we go. It requires explicit, strategic and planned teaching using the workshop model.

The workshop model approach to teaching author’s craft ensures a clear and explicit mini lesson with a specific focus that is modelled, shared and independently practised and reflected on. These mini lessons will depend on the text type that is being read as well as the focus that the teacher wants to explicitly teach during that lesson.

During the “Workshop Model” the teacher needs to demonstrate the deconstruction of the text as it is pulled apart and put back together to examine what it looks like and to understand the features and structures that the author has used.

During independent practice time, students need to be able to examine a piece of text and identify how it has been created. As students come back together they can share their findings and reflect on their practice.

Whole class novels and texts

Teaching author’s craft through whole class novels or text (a shared text where all students have access to a copy of the text) means utilising a text as a vehicle for teaching students ‘how’ to identify, develop and practise specific skills and strategies.

In selecting a text for use by the whole class it is essential that the students’ interests, abilities and reading backgrounds are taken into consideration. We recommend intensive strategies for getting to know your students as readers prior to selecting a text through Reading Observation Records, Reading Interviews and student reflections on themselves as readers. This data is then used to drive planning and instruction to cater for the reading needs of all students in a variety of ways and to support all students in the reading and comprehension process, as well as empowering all students with the strategies, skills and language to believe in themselves as readers. This provides the appropriate scaffolding that supports the spectrum of readers as they are being read to, with and by (independently). Assessment as and for learning continues throughout the reading process.

Independent Reading and the Reading Riddick

The Reading Riddick was developed for use during independent reading for Middle Years students to be able to work through and be accountable for their reading in a more engaging and enriching way than the typical book report or questioning following a text.

Through the Reading Riddick (Riddick meaning to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bloom's Levels of Thinking (start from the bottom)</th>
<th>Author's Craft/ Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Question: What impact did the author's style have on your reading and why? Would you apply any of the author's writing styles in your own writing and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce: Persuasive speech: for or against the author's style and use evidence from the book to support your thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synthesis</strong></td>
<td>Question: What decisions has the author made about structure, language style and text features and how have they applied them throughout the text?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce: Write your own next chapter/ending or sequel applying the author's style as you have identified.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
<td>Question: How is the author developing the characters and plot? What specific strategies has the author applied and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce: Create a Mind Map outlining the specific characteristics of the author's craft using evidence from the text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application</strong></td>
<td>Question: How does this author's style compare to the last book you read or to another author?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce: Compare and contrast essay/infusing thinking organiser</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension</strong></td>
<td>Question: How would you describe the author's style and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce: Create a Press release and advertisement for the book focusing on the author's style as the selling point.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Question: What do you know about the author? What can you find out?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce: Author profile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1
climb), students work through the levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy to demonstrate their reading for meaning from the base order thinking levels of knowledge, comprehension and application, to the higher order thinking levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. (It is noted that revised editions of Bloom’s Taxonomy may reference evaluation preceding synthesis.)

A key element of the Riddick are the categories (across the top of the Riddick) of character development, setting and plot, text conflict and author’s craft and style. It is essential that Middle Years students read independently for meaning beyond the storyline and characters. This is particularly relevant as the later years of secondary school set an expectation that students are able to apply this higher order thinking to a variety of complex and rigorous text types.

The Riddick provides students with a scaffold and framework for thinking development to investigate areas like conflict and author’s craft, progressing their thinking on characters and setting and plot to higher levels.

It is necessary to provide explicit instruction and ongoing support in how to use the Reading Riddick. This includes explicit teaching for understanding of Bloom’s Taxonomy for students to be able to apply the levels of thinking to themselves as readers, as well as the explicit instruction as required for the tasks involved throughout the Riddick.

Table 1 shows a condensed version of the Riddick focused on Author’s Craft and Style. The complete Riddick can be found in Teach Them How: A Professional Learning Package for Middle Years Literacy Teachers (Hawker Brownlow Education 2007).

Reflections from teachers

Ghiran Byrne – Oak Park PS (Gr.4/5)

Text used: Truck Dogs by Graeme Base

I don’t even know if I had ever used the words “author’s craft” in the past with my students, and I don’t know if I have ever really taught it. Well, probably implicitly – but this year has been different.

To assist my 4/5s with understanding the meaning and purpose for Author’s Craft, I chose the book Truck Dogs by Graeme Base for a number of reasons – it would engage my 17 boys; the students have been exposed to other books by the same author and as an introduction to author’s craft, I thought this text would work.

When I first gave my students their own copy of Truck Dogs and mentioned that we would begin reading it as a class, not one turned to the back of the book and read the blurb, acknowledged the dedication or paid attention to why there was a photo of Graeme Base and his dog and an explanation below as to why his dog had apparently written the book. If I had asked my students then and there why they thought Graeme Base had written a book about dogs being trucks or trucks being dogs or what inspired him to write about such an odd topic or a novel, I think they would have made predictions without providing any evidence. Instead, I brought their attention back to the blurb, the dedication and Graeme Base’s dog’s input over a period of two reading sessions. Explicitly focusing on each aspect enabled us as a class to examine decisions made to capture the reader’s attention, and to make accountable predictions using the language and illustrations. We questioned why the author had dedicated the book to that particular person or animal and the reasons why he may have included his own dog’s reflection.

By the end of this thorough examination, my students were not only bursting to read, but they had got to know Graeme Base in depth and had come to view the author as a person. My students began their journey into becoming thoughtful and strategic readers.

Shane Calthorpe – Belle Vue Park PS (Gr. 5/6)

Text used: Holes by Louis Sacher and Maximum Ride by James Paterson

Making the decision to explicitly teach the concept of authors craft was a natural one, one that was in a way instigated by my students as they got ‘into’ our various class novels and wanted to fully understand what was happening in the text and why. When speaking with other teachers, I often refer to our class texts as the ‘joke’ and my students were finally getting it and finding it funny – and they wanted to know why and how they could do the same.

As a class, we identified different things that we experienced as readers and this formed the basis of explicitly looking at what the writer was doing to achieve this in us. I would use old technology, the overhead projector, and photocopy passages from texts and, as a class, we would scribble all over them. We would analyse how the author structured sentences and revealed information to the reader and developed a story and used ‘juicy’ language. This was our focus. At the beginning of each session we would talk about what we were doing and why we were doing it. The students always knew what our purpose was. We didn’t need to spend a great deal of time trying to understand the content of the text; more often than not we ‘got’ that as a result of...
understanding the author’s craft.

Once my class began to understand what writers were trying to do, we set about trying to become just that, a writer. We didn’t complete whole pieces of writing. We focused on individual stages of the writing cycle – we would work on introducing characters or developing a plan without worrying about having to write an entire piece.

By working on developing an understanding of ‘author’s craft’ my students have been able to improve both their reading and writing skills. When reading they understand what is happening in a text and what message the author may be sending and when writing they strive to produce pieces that need be read rather than just decoded. They don’t just get the joke, they are in on it.

Margo Edgar – Pascoe Vale PS (Gr. 5/6)

Text used: Dragonkeeper by Carole Wilkinson

I work with a group of students who are all competent readers, but many of them often didn’t really get, or even try to get, what we read, or couldn’t remember what happened from one session to the next. Reading Dragonkeeper as a class novel has given me the opportunity to challenge their reading abilities to go beyond the surface. This was a perfect opportunity to take the focus off the content and explore the use of author’s craft.

I remember, before starting to read the very first chapter, we discussed the concept that everything the author wrote was for a purpose. This was actually a mini revelation for many of my students, and gave their reading a purpose. Students continued to bring this up throughout the reading of the text and often made connections to ideas that Carole Wilkinson had shared with them right back at the beginning of the book. This point was one that came up frequently in discussions: “You know how you said authors write everything for a reason? I wonder why she wrote that?” The students were beginning to take more notice of what they were reading, to wonder about ideas and to question the author.

We spent a substantial amount of time exploring the concept of ‘showing, not telling’, which Carole Wilkinson does extremely well. This aspect of author’s craft has impacted on the work and understanding of many of my students. We explored how she treated us as intelligent readers and showed us mood, setting, characters and reactions through description, dialogue or action rather than telling us exactly what was happening. Through deconstructing passages and developing a shared understanding of Wilkinson’s techniques, the students have been willing to investigate the use of such techniques in their own writing. The explicit teaching of this through investigating sections of text and asking questions such as, “What is Wilkinson trying to show us?” developed the students as thinking readers and allowed them to support and challenge each other’s ideas.

Teaching author’s craft has developed my own skills in reading and accessing text, both from a personal and professional point of view. Through delving into the world of a writer I have the knowledge and confidence to assist and develop my students’ language and ability to view, discuss and analyse texts.

Conclusion

The impact of the explicit teaching of author’s craft on Middle Years students and teachers has been clearly evident as the together they recognise the skill of the author and question their techniques. Students’ ability (as reflected above) to articulate, provide evidence to support their thinking and, ultimately, to transfer skills and strategies from their reading to their own writing, has been a journey of developing reading and writing personalities in our classrooms.

Empowering students to believe in themselves as readers and writers as they acquire new knowledge and apply new skills, as well as a heightened enjoyment of reading and writing, has had a lasting impact on our teaching practice.

References


