Our inquiry to create a museum was driven by the children’s eagerness to transform the classroom space, and my endeavour to bring reading and writing into an authentic context. A simple termite mound was just the provocation we needed!

Hayley: Maybe we could use that to show the preschoolers?
Shalise: We could decorate it … with sparkles
Ms B: So you have an idea of inviting the preschoolers to visit our class. Would it be OK to just put Danielle’s termite mound on a table for them to see? Would that be enough?
Shalise: No, we tell them what it does
Taniesha: We can draw pictures and show them about termites
Sofia: But they can’t read
Temika: They could ask the teacher what it said
Detroit: We could stand next to a table and tell them about it
Sofia: Remember the class we went to what had all the stuff … like dolphins and turtles … we could do that. We could put stuff up to make the preschoolers learn
Ethan: There is a skeleton in the museum
Ms B: Why do you think people visit a museum?
Noah: To see stuff, to see skeletons and dinosaurs
Ben: To get information … maybe we could make a museum

My focus was to create a context where reading shifted from adult driven to child initiated, a social experience. I equipped the classroom with little pockets of mostly non-fiction books with simple text. I was aware some of my students would read these with ease and hoped that they would act as mentors within the group. Each day I timetable half an hour for quiet reading with the expectation that each child takes 5 books and settles to task of reading. It was interesting to observe the initial interactions as the children tended to flip through the books and rush back for more! Skimming through the books seemed to be a necessary process for some and I noted that after a time these children discovered their ‘favourites’ and would revisit them regularly. Reading became a time of ‘Look what I have found’ or ‘Hey I can read this’.

From this foundation it was easy to scaffold their understanding of the structure and conventions of information texts. It also provided me with a rich...
opportunity to work with small groups to guide their research. As beginning readers and writers the children found it difficult to discern the information that was useful for their project. Again a rich teaching moment presented itself and we began to consider the questions that might be asked by our audience, the preschool children. A list of probable questions was drawn up and the groups used this structure to inform their research. With audience very much in mind the children began to consider how to make interesting posters and imagined how the preschool children would interact within the museum space.

Noah: We could tie the flying fox to the string like it is flying
Detroit: You get a piece string and they (the preschoolers) drag it along like it’s flying
Shalise: But what if they pull it down?
Ben: It might be too heavy and it might fall on their head
Shalise: What if they can’t reach?
Sofia: Maybe we could have a TV showing about the animals
Detroit: We need signs like Do not touch
Wyat: Detroit’s is a good idea or they would touch
Shalise: But they can’t read
Noah: We could draw a hand and put a line through
Sofia: Like you see on most signs … like no smoking

Standing back to give time for the children to initiate the next step was extremely valuable. Often they began with such eagerness for example when creating the first posters, the children wrote and scribbled information on large sheets of paper and were quickly finished. Looking over the final results I could see they were proud of their writing but I could also see it was disorganised and difficult to decipher. It was time to introduce the notion of constructive criticism. I challenged the children to look at their work from the perspective of the audience and began an exploration of poster information.

We revisited the research nonfiction books this time to look closely at how the information was presented and focused upon this when visiting the Darwin Museum. Once again we returned to the perspective of our audience ‘How could we make
explain their day. As they did this I labelled some of the places they had been, as I wanted them to be able to copy some of the ‘difficult’ words successfully. Then they set to the task of writing and produced long and detailed recounts of their day.

The museum project has been an exciting process. Each time I embark on inquiry units I am impressed by the children’s ingenuity, generosity and determination. Having a shared goal is binding as it brings the class together making them a group, a community.

These early posters were an authentic assessment tool and showed me that we needed to focus more on visual information when spelling. I asked the question, ‘Does it look right?’ In small groups we discussed the specific words needed for their poster, which tended to be question starters such as how, who, they and where. Together we unpacked these words and recorded them for future use. We decided to make flap posters, with the question written on the top (for the teachers to read) and underneath an illustrated answer (for the preschoolers). Observing the children and their actions clearly showed that in order to move students’ thinking forward they needed to ‘play’ with the new concept. It became evident that when we discussed theories and challenged ideas this was then transferred to the final product. A great example of this was writing a recount of our trip to the museum.

Rather than begin with the usual modelled writing lesson I asked the children to draw a map of their day at the museum. The maps were extremely detailed and I took the time to ask each child to explain their day. As they did this I labelled some of the places they had been, as I wanted them to be able to copy some of the ‘difficult’ words successfully. Then they set to the task of writing and produced long and detailed recounts of their day.

The museum project has been an exciting process. Each time I embark on inquiry units I am impressed by the children’s ingenuity, generosity and determination. Having a shared goal is binding as it brings the class together making them a group, a community.

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We came to Darwin in the middle of the wet season 2010 after many years in Melbourne, and have fallen in love with the culture and beauty of the Territory.
The place of digital culture in children’s lives

Popular culture and the digital world are an important part of many children’s lives. Computer games, virtual worlds and social networking sites are seamlessly integrated into their everyday work, relationships and play. While the degree and nature of children’s involvement varies according to age, interest, opportunity and parental support, by the time they leave primary school, most students will have had significant engagement with popular culture, media and new technologies, including active first hand experience of digital culture and the online world.

The Digital Beginnings study (Marsh, Brooks, Hughes, Ritchie, Roberts & Wright 2005) found that young children in the UK live in an environment rich with popular culture, media and ICT. ‘They are growing up in a digital world and develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding of this world from birth … engagement with media is generally active, not passive, and promotes play, speaking, listening and reading’ (p. 5). In addition, ‘The introduction of popular culture, media and/or new technologies into the communications, language and literacy curriculum has a positive effect on the motivation and engagement of children in learning’ (p. 6).

In Australia, the Australian Communications and Media Authority researched levels of engagement with digital culture and the online world. This study surveyed the media usage of young people between the ages of 8 and 17 in the year 2007 (ACMA 2008). It explored the media habits of a slightly older age group of primary school-aged children than those in the Digital Beginnings study, (children aged 8–11), but like that study found that online engagement was an important part of children’s lives. In Australia at that time, the study found that boys and girls aged 8–11 spent an average of 30 minutes on the internet per day (p. 4). Between a quarter and a third of children aged 8–11 had a computer or game console in their bedroom (p. 7) and 24% of the 1000 children in this age group who participated in the survey played online gaming against other players (p. 12). For the group as a whole, they found that:

Three of the top four activities that young people liked to do for fun when by themselves were electronic media-related: watching free television (30%), listening to recorded music (25%), and playing video games (24%) – not including games against other players. The second favourite activity category was ‘reading, drawing and writing letters (29%). (ACMA 2008 p. 16)

Given the rapid rate of change, and the growing presence of technology in almost every aspect of our lives, it is highly likely that figures about children’s media usage in both countries have increased since then. All of these are good reasons for building digital literacies into the literacy and English curriculum, and for paying attention to the multimodal, digital texts that are part of contemporary children’s lives.

Digital culture and literacy in the English curriculum

The Australian Curriculum (English) recognises the need to help students become critical and capable users of digital texts and literacies. Its first aim focuses on the need to ensure that students:

Learn to listen to, read, view, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex and sophisticated spoken, written and multimodal texts across a range of contexts with accuracy, fluency and purpose.

(ACARA 2011 Rationale/aims np)