Improving literacy pedagogy and outcomes through teaching imaginatively

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This article reports on an action learning research project in seven classrooms at Curl Curl North Primary School in suburban Sydney during 2008. Funded by an ALEA research grant, the project aimed to improve students’ critical literacy outcomes through:
- Teaching imaginatively using quality literary texts
- A ‘repertoire of pedagogical practices’ (Louden, et al, 2005) aligned with the NSWDET model of pedagogy (2003) and
- Immersion in the Creative Arts

Creativity is as important as literacy and we should treat it with the same status (Robinson, 2008)

By fostering creativity we empower our students to interpret and truly appreciate what it means to be literate. Literature as an art form has the potential to change our lives. It can be an influence or a stimulus which moves us and to which we react with feeling.

We wanted to make a difference and improve our pedagogy so we spent time exploring what we thought was important when teaching students to be critically literate (Lankshear, 1994). Our project was framed by the following questions:
- How do we help students to respond meaningfully to what they read?
- Why is it important that we as teachers of primary children listen to and process the responses of our students to what they are reading?
- How do teachers know which books are authentic and worthwhile texts for close study in the classroom?

The creative arts and literacy

Gleeson (2007, p. 4) argues that, ‘the whole point is to open the mind, to enlarge the experience, to broaden the horizon of the reader’. Author and artist Shaun Tan (2006) highlights art as the transformation of an idea, subject or concept by an artist. A concept is connected with the world and its meaning. In this way educators can view the Creative Arts not only as separate disciplines, but also as tools for learning about other curriculum areas. All forms of Art need time for exploration, experimentation and play in the effort to solve a puzzle or problem. As teachers we can reflect on this in terms of scaffolding creative activities for students.

Creative Arts and critical literacy both require students to ‘develop knowledge of and learn to ‘read’ the conventions of the symbol systems used in the art forms to communicate and exchange ideas about the world’ (BOS, 2000 p. 6). Using the Arts we can delve more deeply into the meaning of the creator, ourselves and our society, giving students the tools to ‘see’ and understand what they experience in literacy lessons.

Why use narrative?
The creative teacher, Gleeson (2007) writes, uses many stories to develop curiosity and celebrates original responses in students. Similarly Margaret Meek (1988, p. 40) concludes ‘it is hard for anyone whose life has been enriched by books to exclude the young from this source of pleasure and serious reflection. What we have to realise is that the young have powerful allies in a host of gifted artists and writers to help them subvert the world of their elders’. Each teacher involved in the study chose various aspects of narrative as a starting point for their programs.

Implementation

I believe we set out to challenge ourselves, try something new and think about our practice. I believe we also set out to motivate, inspire and support each other.

Gretel Watson, teacher, North Curl Curl
Practically Primary

Karen
Kindergarten

Text: Lucy’s Cat and the Rainbow Birds (Hill, 2007)
Tasks: Shared reading, mime with percussion, studied use of alliteration.

At the beginning of the year some children were able to write their first name. Some had a rich literary background while others had little experience with books. One student initially found it difficult to stay in the classroom at all. Now when we are brainstorming as a class about what we are writing this student offers valuable suggestions and has his own ideas about what he is going to write.

I recorded numerous student responses in regard to artworks and quality teaching texts. I noticed increased vocabulary, imagination, the use of more complex sentences and increased exuberance when speaking about a topic proposed to them. The majority of students are now using adjectives and adverbs and writing two or more sentences at a time. If they can’t spell a word they find it around the room or use their dictionary. They also enjoy reading their stories back to me and pick up and edit mistakes they have made along the way.

In the end of term parent interviews the parents kept remarking on how amazed they were at what the children were writing. And I must admit, for Kindergarten, I am too!

Carla
Year 1

Text: Herb, the Vegetarian Dragon was used as a starting point.

We worked on a dragon unit and the children began by visualizing dragons. When we began, J. initially found it difficult to write but with the Dragons Unit, he used his wild imagination and an artistic flair. He used wonderful metaphors to describe his dragon and was able to write an impressive poem and illustrate it. Every day he would come into school with new drawings he had done or sculptures he had made with plasticine at home.

Another student with a pronounced stutter began to use highly evocative language such as, ‘The Wizard’s beard was like steam coming from a dragon’s nostrils’. He was able to make connections from our work with dragons to his other writing.

I am totally convinced that using good quality texts coupled with drama, music and art engages students.

Gretel
Year 1

During initial drama sessions one six year old boy, D., demonstrated a lack of confidence to express himself dramatically. His written ideas were always exceptional but he had difficulty during oral sessions. This changed as a result of our unit of work. He demonstrated good eye contact and a confident approach to the drama. His ideas were original, a little humorous and well presented. At the beginning I thought D. did not need to be a participant in the drama to improve his understanding. Yet his smile and body language as he watched others often intimated that he valued and enjoyed these sessions.

As a whole, the class has demonstrated improved confidence to share their ideas thoughts and opinions. I also believe that the children have listened more carefully as their opinion has been valued. They are more interested in what other have to say and share.

The confidence of one student was particularly impressive. This student has English as a Second Language and was always eager to volunteer an answer or comment. These comments were often off task. Through the learning experiences, she began to demonstrate greater confidence and commitment to our work. I believe that drama has aided her improvement in listening, understanding and contributing interesting opinions and ideas.

We used an action learning process (Revans, 1983; Aubusson, Ewing & Hoban, 2009) as a professional development framework. This meant that our group of teachers formed an action learning ‘set’ which met regularly to collaboratively discuss the research questions, plan relevant programs and then reflect on and evaluate what we implemented. Some teachers attended professional learning in areas of relevance for the project, for example K-6 Drama activities at the National Institute of Dramatic Art. Two teachers involved staff in activities from Into the Story (Miller & Saxton, 2004). Our academic partner joined the group when possible to act as our critical friend. We benchmarked students’ talking and listening and writing before we began by giving them response tasks to complete with absolutely no scaffolding. Then we compared these to work that they could do at various points during the project.

We looked at ‘response’ in the English K-6 Modules (BOS, 1998) and developed activities to aid children’s ability to respond to text and to help them articulate these responses. Each arts-literacy activity was planned with the view to using elements from the NSW model of pedagogy (2003) particularly ‘deep understanding’, ‘substantive communication’ and ‘social support’. Further, in each case study
Student writing samples demonstrated a transformation from their initial response to:

- Jenny Year 6
- Doug Year 4
- Jackie Year 1

Students' deeper understanding of the themes through art works:

- Comparison of brainstorming sheets and frozen moments done at the beginning and end of reading "The Red Tree" (Tan, 2000), "The Arrival" (Tan, 2006) and "The Lost Thing" (Tan, 2001). Students prepared questions to hot seat characters. Later they studied song lyrics for "Fragile" (Sting). They also wrote a readers' theatre script to tell the story of "The Arrival" (Tan, 2006). Some early responses about "The Red Tree" were, "This is weird", "It is strange – I don't understand it". However, substantive communication when reading "The Lost Thing" was evident as the students began to see the author's style through their reading of "The Red Tree" and "The Arrival". Through discussions the students described the relationship between words and pictures and made varied interpretations. The questioning and questions asked reflected on a growing awareness of the relationship between imagery and meaning. One child shared, 'A book isn't just words, you can also use your imagination'. Written responses showed an interpretation of imagination and symbolism resulting in an insightful understanding by many students.

- Diary entries to and from Hana and hot seating. Film clips of students' dramatisation of a significant event in the story "Hana's Suitcase".

- Visual responses to "Hana's Suitcase" (also short written responses in role)
- Film clips of students' dramatisation of a significant event in the story
- Diary entries to and from Hana and hot seating.

- Student writing samples demonstrated a transformation from their initial response to "Come away from the water, Shirley" (Burmingham, 1992) to a deep understanding of the themes in each of the books after the drama and visual literacy activities.
classroom, a small group of students was profiled at various stages over the year. We used questions from Aidan Chambers’ (1991) text to assist teachers provide a scaffold for student responses. The drama, art, movement and writing were problem solving, interpretative aspects of the reading of the book but also became a record of students’ achievements and improvements as we went along.

Findings
It is difficult to describe the complexity and extent of the learning that we observed within one article. Each teacher has reported the texts they used and some observations about student progress. These are based on comparisons between work samples and behaviours before the project and then after two terms.

Evaluation
The changes in learning outcomes for students in the classes of the teachers involved in this project have included increased motivation and engagement, vocabulary, use of metaphors and awareness of the relationship between imagery and meaning. An underlying theme of teacher reflections is a more confident approach to learning by students and the ability to listen to and value the contribution of others. Substantive communication is evident in all classrooms as is deeper understanding of narrative including characters, themes and structure. Teachers of classes K-6 mentioned the development of creativity and imagination throughout the project. Improvement of descriptive narrative and response writing in classes has been documented and substantiated. Some comments from the teachers’ reflections about their professional learning:

- I found this experience uplifting and enlightening – the drama strategies and techniques have become an integral part of my teaching and learning…
- Drama in the classroom now has an entirely new meaning for me… I have gone from using simple comprehension worksheets with disconnected texts of varying quality, to using carefully selected, quality texts and stimulating understanding through drama, art, writing, basic movie making, questioning and a multitude of other strategies….
- I began to realise that Drama and other Creative Arts could improve writing outcomes measurably …

An overwhelmingly positive outcome for all seven teachers is their willingness to share with other teachers because of the results for students.

Conclusion
We have witnessed student engagement, increased motivation and creativity in learning through our lessons. Our findings show that the Creative Arts takes literacy beyond talking, listening, reading and writing and into critical literacy including observation, analysis, interpretation and ‘making sense of their (students’) world’ (Lee & Fradd, 1998 in Miller & Saxton, 2004 p. 2). We have continued our action learning process through 2009 and 2010, but changed focus. Recently, we have concentrated on a reading for meaning focus with a particular emphasis on readers’ theatre.

We compare our professional learning process as a group to theatre practice (Miller & Saxton, 2004). There have been elements of community, empathy and shared meaning. The challenge is now to share our meanings with other educators in our immediate and wider community for the benefit of all students. Our education revolution must foster innovation and creativity

References


**Literary texts**


At the time of writing this article classroom teachers Janelle Warhurst, Jenny Pickering, Gretel Watson, Doug Neale, Carla Rathmell, Jackie Ireland and Karen Crawford with their academic partner Professor Robyn Ewing had been awarded the ALEA grant for 2008. They commenced an action learning project together at Curl Curl North Primary School with the foundation that the Creative Arts improves Literacy outcomes for all students. All teachers and Professor Robyn Ewing believe that imaginative and innovative programs which explicitly link Arts Education and Literacy with authentic texts increase motivation and engagement for both teachers and students. Professor Robyn Ewing is the Professor of the Arts in Education at Sydney University in the faculty of Education and Social Work. Her work at Curl Curl North Primary School for more than fifteen years has led to a professional learning community which continues its research with process Drama in 2009 and 2010.