Practical Strategies

Reading Companions: Building Communities of Shared Experiences

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The Middle Years of schooling has been and continues to be a major focus for educators across Australia and beyond (Deakin University 2001, Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Hill and Crevala 1997, Christie 1998). Students in Years 5–9 bring a wealth of knowledge and skills that need to be harnessed. As well, these learners have specific needs as they make the transition between primary and secondary schooling. Victoria’s Middle Years Literacy Research Project (1999) made recommendations for ways to improve literacy education in particular. In response, this paper will document and argue for a collaborative approach to teaching and learning in the middle years that promotes a wider community of learners learning critical reading strategies, developing teachers’ knowledge and explicit teaching as well as establishing new and exciting partnerships.

With this knowledge in mind we needed to take ideas to a school’s ‘shop floor’ and try to play out what this effective teaching and learning might look like, sound like and feel like. We also wanted to discover what types of learning communities we could build that would deepen teacher and student understandings and transit seamlessly and effectively between primary, secondary and tertiary sectors.

Setting the scene

Two lecturers in the School of Education at RMIT University joined forces with a Middle Years cluster coordinator to take a subject in Extending Investigations in Literacy where pre-service teachers work in a Virtual Primary School alongside their virtual mentor Anna Jones. The Virtual School (named Lathner Primary) was created to allow our novice teachers the opportunity to talk about the same school and students and to experience and take risks in an educational setting that is moving its teaching and learning to New Times.

The virtual Grade 4/5F class of 20 students in this virtual primary school have been studying the novel Dragonkeeper by Carole Wilkinson as a whole class novel. The lecturing team for the subject were two university lecturers and a Middle Years Innovations and
Excellence Cluster Educator. This kept university lecturers closely in touch with teachers and students in schools and kept the Middle Years Cluster Coordinator in touch with current theory. A few of the teachers in the Middle Years Cluster were also studying *Dragonkeeper* with their students and a constant flurry of information and conversation flowed back and forth enriching all participants. In 2005 a Memorandum of Understanding was written and signed between the Pascoe Vale Middle Years Cluster and Teacher Education staff at RMIT University. The Cluster focus statement was to improve literacy innovative pedagogy and the implementation and development of higher order thinking skills. By opening up the doors of learning, educators had greater potential to learn from each other. Teachers and university lecturers were invited to go into one another’s classrooms and into tutorial groups and lectures at university and experience new ideas, and new landscapes for learning. University lecturers provided Middle Years teachers with literacy workshops. A learning community was established between pre-service teachers, university lecturers, cluster primary and secondary teachers and middle years’ students. The learning community had a common focus on and commitment to reshaping and deepening reading practices in the middle years of schooling.

**LEARNING THROUGH TEACHING**

*Explicit Teaching of strategies capable readers use*

Throughout the semester, scenarios were constructed around critical moments in the virtual classroom and background information was provided (online and in lectures) about the teacher/mentor and the 20 students in the Year 4/5 classroom. Novice teachers were encouraged to place these students ‘under the microscope’ in order to get to know their learning styles, reading habits, attitudes to literacy and their abilities so that they could plan with them. The children in 4/5F had been reading *Deltora Quest: Forests of Silence* as a whole class novel. Their class teacher Anna Jones had introduced response journals and literature circles prior to reading *Deltora Quest*. During work on *Dragonkeeper*, she wanted to continue this work and foster a far more critical approach to reading.

Staff in the subject repeatedly demonstrated how specific reading strategies could be introduced, scaffolded and explicitly taught to students. For instance, in tutorials, we shared a range of critical questions that could be used in relation to *Dragonkeeper*. Then the novice teachers worked in groups with a number of these critical questions. They were asked to defend their responses to the questions by revisiting the text and finding evidence to support their viewpoints. They presented these to their small group and deepened insights through dialogue before sharing them with the whole tutorial group. We were modelling a process of reading or listening to the text to first evoke pleasure – using their Response Journals and/or Post it Notes to remind themselves to return to moments such as specific passages in the text that posed confusion, aroused curiosity, related to something in their own lives or contained vocabulary they didn’t understand.

Then the readers were invited to ask another set of questions as they revisited the text. These questions would take them deeper into the content. Connecting to this was extensive and intensive professional development provided to teachers in the cluster in explicit teaching of reading strategies for middle years’ students. Practising teachers in the Pascoe Vale Cluster had limited prior professional learning about how to teach students in the middle years, how to continue to develop as readers and writers beyond grades two and three.

This professional development was ongoing throughout the year and was openly made available to all cluster teachers and pre-service teachers in the subject. Teachers were provided with time and support to take strategies back to the classroom and then time to reflect on and share the learning process collectively as a learning community across the cluster.
Students in the cluster classrooms were involved in planned reading units focused on scaffolding the reading and teaching explicitly strategies to help students develop into capable readers (Tovani 2001). Students were reading rich texts (Dragonkeeper – Carole Wilkinson, Holes – Louis Sacher and Hitler's Daughter – Jackie French,) developing accountable talk about the text and their reading, a repertoire of reading strategies, developing book clubs and using Reading Response Journals.

Family members were a part of reshaping reading in the Middle Years across schools through information sessions designed to assist them in helping their children become better readers and writers, and Parent Book Clubs ran alongside student book clubs happening in the classrooms. At Oak Park Primary School we had 20 parents come along weekly to read together and discuss Dragonkeeper and apply the reading strategies in the same way as their students.

**LEARNING THROUGH TALK AND ROLE-PLAY**

*Conversations – in and out of role*

The importance of conversing as readers and writers, and having opportunities to discuss what has been read or being written, is too frequently overlooked in middle years classrooms. While the expectations are increased, as we expect students in these years to increasingly read and write larger amounts of more complex texts, it appears that we provide less instruction on how to actually read and write. Conversations help students to raise and interrogate issues.

Within the cluster schools, conversations about reading were paramount. A conscious effort was made to provide a structure for and opportunities to talk about what was read. Teacher modelling of this talk and thinking aloud was essential through planned mini lessons focused on explicit reading strategies. Some of the talk was in the form of role-plays where the pre-service teachers became characters in the novel and expanded on the reasons behind the decisions they made or explored their feelings. At other times, the characters were interviewed by their peers as talk show guests describing their inner journeys.

*Building Accountable Talk*

While conversations about texts are a starting point, ensuring that this dialogue between students is accountable and rigorous is just as fundamental. However, again, this is a skill that needs to be modelled and explicitly taught and fostered in middle years classrooms.

When classroom talk is accountable to the learning community, students do a lot of talking related to the subject being studied or the issue under discussion. Students listen to one another, not just obediently keeping quiet until it is their turn to take the floor, but attending carefully so that they can use and build on each other’s ideas. They can paraphrase and expand upon one another’s contributions. If they aren’t sure they understood what someone else said, they make an effort to clarify. They disagree respectfully, challenging a claim, not the person who made it. They move the argument forward, sometimes with the teacher’s help, sometimes on their own. (Principles of Learning)

Through Accountable Talk in literacy, students are fostered to be confident that what they are saying is true and, if challenged, should be prepared to back it up with evidence from the text or from their connections that supports their thinking. Their responses to such questions will cite a specific passage from text that they are working with or refer to knowledge built in the course of discussion.

They connect ideas within and between texts, to their own personal experiences and to the world around them through text to text, text to self and text to world connections (Allington 2001).
Building Accountable Talk with pre-service teachers, using the text *Dragonkeeper* as a vehicle, therefore became a similar focus within the subject and likewise with teachers within the cluster. Significant professional learning experiences took place to build accountable talk as teachers with a text, to then transfer these skills and strategies to the classroom and competently model these to students.

**Book Clubs and Literature Circles**

The ideal environment to foster and develop Accountable Talk in the early stages in literacy is a Book Club. Unlike Literature Circles, (in the true definition as outlined by Harvey Daniels which are more structured and involve students in specific roles,) Book Clubs are designed with the primary purpose to promote informal fluid conversations about a text. In a similar format to how adults come together to chat about what they have read, or are reading and have conversations which clarify understandings, share connections and discuss the impact of the text in book clubs, as can children do. In our experience in the cluster, we have seen this as an essential stepping stone towards the development of more rigorous literature circles in the long term.

This letter to Carole Wilkinson is an example of the learning fostered in the Book Clubs.

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Dear Carole,

Thank you for your previous letter. We have now finished *Dragonkeeper* and we loved it. Not one of us guessed or had predicted that the stone was an egg and we were surprised. We read the last three chapters together in our book club and we couldn’t believe it or put it down. We were speechless! In the group we were all making facial expressions while we read. You had us hooked in!

We loved being a part of the *Dragonkeeper* Book Club and we have become better readers by using your book. This is how we have become better readers:

Georgia – I became a better reader learnt new juicy words that I have never thought of before.

Sheree – I have become a better reader because now I know how to go back and reflect back on what was written in the text. I also learnt how to read out loud clearly and fluently.

Brittnee – I have become a better reader because now I like these types of adventure books and I can understand them.

Ozge – I’ve become a better reader by being able to turn back to the pronunciation page and the glossary to help me. I also use sticky notes to write the words that I don’t know as I read and by using our reading response journals to write down predictions and wonderings as I read along. Being able to talk about it as we read it in the book club made it easier to understand.

Abir – I am a better reader now because I am writing down predictions and going back to the text to look at clues and to get a better understanding of the story. My reading is now faster and more fluent.

Rebecca – I have become a better reader because I have learnt to go back and find evidence in the text to help my predictions … I am more confident now and my spelling is getting better too.

Thank you for inspiring us to read. Way to go Carole!!!!

Yours sincerely,

Coburg North Primary School Book Club (Ozge, Brittnee, Rebecca, Sheree, Abir and Georgia)

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As previously mentioned, involving family members in a Book Club was also very successful in establishing links between home and the classroom, where again the emphasis was on book talk and rich accountable discussions derived naturally from the text, rather than forced, structured or mandated roles or questioning.
LEARNING THROUGH WRITING AND DRAWING AND EMAILING

Response Journals

Tovani (2000) reminds us that good readers don’t remember everything they read. They use tools to hold on to their thinking so they can return to it later. Using these tools allows the reader to use the text to justify and support their reading.

- Good readers ask questions of the text while they are reading to gain a greater understanding. They listen to the voice inside their heads that helps them with their understanding, asks questions or raises confusion.
- Good readers record their connections in order to hold on to their thinking, which can later be used to support points in a discussion or a writing assignment.
- Good readers wonder about their reading. They use textual evidence and background knowledge and experiences to help them answer their questions.

Reading Response Journals are one of the tools readers can use to hold on to their thinking, record their connections, questions and wonderings and track their thoughts and understandings as they read through a text (particularly a longer text such as Dragonkeeper).

For middle years students, providing support structures to help with comprehension are critical. However, because these students are mostly ‘typical’ students in the middle years who are often disengaged easily, lack self motivation and question the purpose of everything, application of such journals in the traditional sense, are often met with resistance.

Within the cluster, a new approach was taken with the response journals. An emphasis of negotiation, choice and freedom was placed on these journals. Teachers themselves modelled how to use reading response journals while they read and fostered the understanding that it is a strategy used by good readers to help them understand as they read.

While at times students can be instructed towards how to use their journals, or asked to reflect on aspects of the text or author’s craft, in general students are actively encouraged to make their own entries in a variety of ways. Teachers found that students were more willing to participate in their journal work and share it with others when they weren’t directed to write in it and when it wasn’t corrected by their teachers.

Cluster teachers and pre-service teachers were involved with professional development and learning in the use of reading response journals and were themselves encouraged to keep their own journals through cluster professional Book Clubs and through the subject respectively. As well family members in the Dragonkeeper Book Club were encouraged to keep response journals.

Partners in conversation

We recognised that there are myriad ways to allow students and teachers to engage in purposeful learning conversations. For instance, we invited Carole Wilkinson (author of Dragonkeeper) to join our online Discussion Forum for two weeks at RMIT University. Having an author online sparked great enthusiasm in the novel. An example of an interaction with the author follows.

From Carole Wilkinson:

I have just read through some of the previous comments before I joined in. I was very interested to read some students’ responses to Ping and how they identified with her. I wanted Ping to be a role model for girls who are not confident. The average girls who don’t star. That was me when I was at school. Teachers never remembered my name, my marks were average, but that didn’t mean I didn’t have some skills/talent. It just wasn’t on the surface. Like Ping my talents had to be dragged out of me. (Hence
I didn’t start writing till I was nearly 40. I’d be interested to hear your comments, but I feel this lack of self-confidence is more common in girls. It is common for women who are obviously successful at what they do to feel they are impostors. Not really good at what they do and that someone will find them out.

I hoped that Ping would encourage girls to believe they had talents, even if they hadn’t discovered them yet.

Letter from a pre-service teacher to Carole:

Your comment is so real to me. I struggled with English as a child due to the fact that I was an ESL kid. Growing up was hard. On my English report it always read ‘Anna has poor expression’.

As a young adult my dream was to become a teacher but never felt smart enough. I was encouraged by my partner to try. I attended a TAFE college and undertook year 12 English with a truly amazing teacher who knew how to reach me. I explained to her my concerns about English and how I was terrified that I had to read several novels. She was very understanding and she recommended that I write a personal journey of my life experiences and my struggles with the English language. That was the ticket to my dream.

Thank you for creating Ping for all the girls who feel that they aren’t smart or good enough.

As well, some of our pre-service teachers had penpals with Year 5 students reading the novel Dragonkeeper helping them understand the knowledge students bring to the text.

Dear Kris, Shane, Cath, Louise, and Liana,

How are you? I think it would be annoying if I got pushed around how Master Lam does to the slave girl. If I was the slave girl I would run away and start my own life, far away from the mean and terrible Master Lan. I think the book is interesting but in another way sad. I think the slave girl has a depressing life and makes me feel sad and disgusted when the dragon got cut up and made into a pickle. I think Master Lan ought to be taught a lesson. Have you ever been overseas and seen a slave girl in the cold working? What age can kids become slaves? We are already up to chapter 5. I can’t wait to find out more. But please do not tell me.

Conclusion

Reading is a social act and fostering reading companions between university lectures, pre-service teachers, authors, school teachers, students and their families can provide endless possibilities for enriching experiences, pleasures and critical understandings while reading. Within these fruitful dialogues, all participants’ share and practise effective reading strategies in an environment that fosters and promotes partnerships in multiple readings of texts.
References


Deakin University (2001) Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years: Major report on the middle years literacy research project to CECV, DEET, AISV and DETYA.


