

Exley, Beryl and Wright, Sandra (2004) Connecting communities - Contextualising literacies . Practically Primary 9(1):4-8.

# Connecting communities Contextualising literacies

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Over time, the Meanjin local council of ALEA, has been running a series of Key Teacher inservice days for teachers in the Brisbane and Ipswich area, and more recently further north in Yandina for Sunshine Coast teachers. Teachers who are ALEA members or whose schools are institutional members are able to attend up to three of these inservice days each year for a nominal cost. In the first part of this article Beryl Exley reviews the sessions presented on Friday 17 October, 2003 at Ipswich, a region mentored by ALEA Queensland State President, Nikki King. The sessions all dealt with the theme of connecting communities and contextualising literacies. In the second part Sandra Wright, a key teacher at Hatton Vale State School, details the experiences of her school's attempt to connect with its community and to contextualise children's multiple literacies.

## Meanjin's Local Council Key Teacher Day - Ipswich

*Beryl Exley, Faculty of Education, QUT*

The first session of the day was delivered by Victoria Menzies, an art teacher, a visual artist and a sessional tutor at QUT & Griffith University. Victoria's session focused on practical strategies teachers could employ to bring image and language together to build children's literacy resources. In one part of her session, Victoria presented a series of powerpoint slides of painted plates and asked participants to give a personal response to each. She encouraged participants to draw on the model for art appreciation developed by Max Darby (see Figure One). After participants worked their way through a couple of dozen plate images, Victoria introduced a range of images that represented children's bedrooms. She used images presented in children's picture books and asked participants to articulate the multiple stories that could be read from each. She helped participants to focus on the symbolism and the range of interpretations possible. Finally she invited small groups of participants to construct a story that could take place in a child's bedroom and represent it as a single image on a plate. Participants discussed how they could represent what was in their multiple minds as a single image for other viewers. After everyone's visual image was created, the plates were put on display and other groups were invited to deconstruct the imagery. This process of deconstructing and reconstructing visual literacy, through oral and written literacy, is a useful way of connecting multiple literacies.

After morning tea, I facilitated a one and a half hour workshop entitled *Teachers' & Students' Literacy Identities*, a workshop that I co-wrote with Maree Hedemann from EQ's *Literate Futures: Reading* team. This workshop encouraged participants to locate themselves as certain types of literacy users vis-à-vis the literacy identity of students. I asked participants to describe their life and literacy experiences on the spokes of a wheel. In particular participants were asked to identify the following: their social and cultural knowledges and experiences; knowledge about texts; prior experience with text; and technological knowledge and experiences. I then presented a series of role cards that introduced some fictitious students and an in-school incident. Participants had to map out these students' literacy identities and then compare and contrast them with their own. There were two aims to this activity. The first was to highlight the way that teachers' and students' literacy identities are not normal or natural; rather they are informed by particular social and cultural considerations. The second aim was to highlight that differences within groups are sometimes as significant as differences between groups. As teachers, we need to resist temptations to label groups of people as alike on the basis of some similar characteristics. In doing so, I wanted to interrupt 'common sense' and 'taken-for-granted' ways of viewing teachers' and students' literacy identities. The purpose was not so much to find answers to such complex issues; rather the purpose was to highlight similarities and differences between groups of teachers and to consider what their identity means for their work as literacy teachers.

Realisations of multiple literacies and multiple communities of literacy users are especially important in these New Times where the world continues to change socially, technologically and economically. Understanding and appreciating the magnitude of such changes is important. For example, there are many who subscribe to the notion that 'the world is getting smaller'. They use this metaphor to support their claim that parts of the world are becoming more the same. Examples of such activity would be the 'McDonaldisation' of eateries in the world's cities, and closer to home, the way that all Westfield shopping centres Australia wide are relatively homogeneous. There is nothing that sets each apart, or to put it another way, there is nothing that localises an Australian McDonalds or an Australian Westfield shopping centre. Yet, we also need to acknowledge that forms of social and cultural diversity are becoming more prominent. For example, non-Aboriginal communities seem to be increasingly interested in respecting the diversity within Aboriginal communities rather than labelling all Aboriginal communities as the same. *Literate Futures: Reading* (2002, p. 10) reminds us that 'in Queensland, social change is also manifested in changing demographic and community profiles: community diversity is now the norm rather than the exception'.

On the technological front, new information systems and systems of communication are proliferating our everyday lives. We know that communication can occur almost instantaneously across the globe. Groups of people throughout the world are able to communicate directly with our students. This means that information and communication are not controlled by education systems, governments or the media in the way that we have been used to. The flip side to such changes is that there are also greater numbers of people who are being further marginalised by a lack of access to technology and thus to these information and communication systems. These also tend to be the same groups who are marginalised by dwindling financial resources.

As teachers, we also know that to be literate in today's world means that you have to be able to engage with many different forms of text. In other words, we know that you have to be multi-literate. Being print literate is no longer enough. We're also seeing a plethora of new and blended text forms come into the lives of our students. Students have to make meanings with texts that use a range of semiotic systems and multiple modes that may be delivered by a range of technologies (refer to *Literate Futures: Reading*, 2002, p. 18-25). For example, SMS texting is in advertisements and probably in our students' own work (mayb ur using it 2!). As Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2003) point out, people are spending as much time 'looking into' their phones for the purposes of texting and video messaging as they are 'talking into' them.

In short, these New Times have radically changed the literacy knowledges children need. They have also changed the work of literacy teachers. I left participants with this problematic: What do such realisations mean for their work as literacy teachers?

### **Figure One: Model for Student Centred Art Appreciation (Darby, 1988).**

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Name of Art Work:

Name of Artist:

Date Produced:

1. What is your first impression of the work?
2. What can you see?
  - What is the work – a painting, a film, a sculpture, a print, a costume?
  - What is it made from – paint, stone, metal, plastic, canvas, board, paper?
  - What skills & techniques have been employed – use of palette knife, etching,, embroidery, film-editing, stone-setting, carving? Describe them.
  - What art elements have been used – kinds of lines, variety of shapes, the use of one or many textures, intensity and value of colour, the use of space or depth?
  - What principles of art have been used to assemble the work – balance, harmony, rhythm, repetition, proportion?
  - What is the subject matter? Describe it – for example, figures fighting, the season, a rough day, the 'generation gap'?
3. What does it mean?
  - What message, if any, is the artist trying to convey? Is it clear, confused, ambiguous?
  - What expressive qualities, if any, does the art work reveal – moods, feeling & emotions (hate, fear, love, empathy, sadness, loneliness, warmth, enjoyment)?
  - Is the message or meaning a common one (has it been portrayed by other artists or by the same artist before)?
4. What do other people think of the work?
  - What do art historians and writers think?
  - What does your teacher think?
  - What do other students think?
  - What are the differences between what you think of the work and what others think?
4. (alternative questions)
  - How well has the artist used those characteristics observed in questions 2 & 3 to complete the work?
  - Describe the effectiveness of the personal style used by the artist? Does it suit the particular work?

- Decide whether or not you consider the work to be good. What particular features have influenced your decision?
5. Do you like the work?
    - What do you like most about the work? This may coincide with your description above, however, there may be other qualities that you admire.
    - What do you like least about the work?
    - Decide whether or not you like the work.
  6. What is your impression of the work now? Has it changed? How?

After lunch, Sandra Wright, a key teacher from Hatton Vale State School, spoke about her school's attempt to connect to its disengaged community to a range of literacies. Her story forms the next section of this article.

## One Case Study: Hatton Vale State School

*Sandra Wright, Key Teacher, Hatton Vale State School*

Located in Education Queensland's West Moreton Region, Hatton Vale State School has recently relocated from the Warrego Highway to a larger plot of land four kilometers off the very busy Brisbane-Toowoomba road. The move was precipitated by a burgeoning increase in school numbers. Six years ago there were only 35 students enrolled at Hatton Vale. Now school numbers sit around 320. Prolonged periods of drought forced a number of Hatton Vale's farmers to subdivide and sell their land. At the same time, soaring real estate and rental prices in Brisbane has forced many families, such as those from Woodridge, Kingston, Marsden and Slacks Creek, to opt for lower priced housing away from the city ([www.hattvale.qld.edu.au](http://www.hattvale.qld.edu.au)). Such dramatic and wide ranging changes had a negative effect on community cohesiveness within the new look school. Some parents and students were already anti-school and anti-teachers. We wanted to improve the relationship between the wider community and the school. We wanted to tap into some of the expertise within the community group and to provide a positive demonstration of intra-community cooperation for the students. At the same time we were overtly committed to developing comprehensive literacy programs. We knew that strong literacy foundations were crucial to students' life chances and life choices.

One day, Jackie Cosentino, a parent and a freelance artist arrived at the Year Two classroom and asked could she introduce studio based art experiences into the classroom. She was passionate about art because she believed that it was an equaliser; all children were already artists. She said it wasn't like reading and maths where only some children were good at it and the children knew if they fitted into the 'good at it' or 'not good at it' group. Through hands-on discovery Jackie taught the children about the shapes within the human body and how these shapes change when the body moves. The children learnt how to represent such changes through various types of drawing. Their combined efforts became the 'Children at Play' art work; an art work which we are proud to say featured on the cover of *Practically Primary* in June 2003.

The excitement following this project fostered the creativity and the urge for other classes to become involved. Jackie tapped into her network and introduced us to Alison & Lyndall Kearsley, freelance

artists also known as *The Storm Sisters*. *The Storm Sisters* were equally passionate about young children's art experiences and were excited by the school's invitation to become involved in a school wide art program. Alison was adamant that it was important to show children that everyday items, even rubbish, can be the stimulus or the foundation for larger-than-life art works. All it takes is a bit of imagination and lots of paper, glue and sticky tape. She also wanted children to see how art could be a medium for making a point, for getting a message across. She wanted children to understand that this was the difference between 'art' and 'craft'.

So as a team, the teachers, the artists in residence and the students, set about designing their own projects. Some classes used drama units as their foundation, while other classes drew on literature or art units for their stimulation. By the end of term each class had made a larger-than-life papier-mache sculpture and all children were involved in painting murals and constructing collages.

It was amazing the number of discussions that each group had as their sculpture, murals and collages were created. Parents talked to children, children talked to each other and parents talked to teachers. Children described their ideas, they shared with each other, they listened and watched and they learned to respect each others' ideas and feelings as they worked together. It gave us a reason to work together and to understand each other. It provided teachers with a context and focus for further improving written and visual literacy and oracy outcomes in our school. Students were motivated because they had a real life purpose for creating, talking, writing and reading. The meaning and purpose of what we were doing became very clear to both students and their parents. It gave parents an understanding that literacy is more than just reading and writing. The reading results in the recent Year Two Diagnostic Net was one of the highest in Queensland.

The sculptures have just been covered in white paper. We have yet to paint them. The aim is to hold an art exhibition and auction where the children's wonderful creations will be displayed to demonstrate the success of our child/artist/teacher/parent interactions. We want to showcase their works and celebrate our combined achievements. We will auction these works to members of our larger local community. This ensures that our work will go to people who will cherish it. It also ensures that we will have ongoing funds to continue with our art program. The teachers acknowledge that this has been an enormous amount of work, but we also know that nothing comes without a price. In our case, the rewards were much more than what we had envisaged. Up until now, art was something that we did on Friday afternoons. Little did we realise that it could connect a disparate community and be such a powerful vehicle for contextualising literacies.

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