"Authentic" learning experiences: what does this mean and where is the literacy learning?

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Title

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Abstract

Teachers are challenged to adopt practices that facilitate the development of "necessary" skills and strategies for learners. For many, however, what is required in policy and curricula is increasingly obscured and even confusing as teachers are bombarded with jargon prescribing seemingly similar (yet apparently different) approaches such as "rich tasks", "big questions" and "fertile questions" that are to be "relevant", "authentic" and "engaging" for the learner. Barton and Hamilton (2000) argue that literacy learning should take the learner beyond the transmission of technical skills in the classroom to an understanding of its role within a community's cultural practices. These literacy practices (Street, 1995) are mediated by literacy events (Heath, 1983) and it is engagement with these events and their diverse demands that allows learners to make strong connections to their own literacy practices.

Reported in this paper are the interpretations of four experienced primary school teachers as they plan, program and facilitate authentic literacy experiences in their classrooms. These are examined within the framework of the principles of authentic learning (Herrington & Oliver, 2000), which is useful in gaining insight into the ways that experienced teachers make sense of the complex jargon associated with their profession for the development of deep and flexible knowledge that can be applied in a range of community settings. Evident in these teachers' stories are the understandings, beliefs, contexts and competing tensions that underpin the conceptualisation, design and implementation of these experiences. The teachers' stories reveal the complexity of teaching as they consider:
- the individual contexts of their schools
- their students' own communities
- the expectations of stakeholders in a child's education
- the availability of resources.

Keywords

Authentic learning experiences, literacy learning, principles of authentic learning framework, teachers' knowledge.

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"Authentic" learning experiences: What does this mean and where is the literacy learning?

Reviewing the literature

Criticism continues to be levelled at schools for their inability to provide learners with the environments that learners of today require. Findings in the literature include observations that school simply prepares children for school (Jonassen, 2003), that the school environment is too prescriptive (Gee, 2004), that it lacks relevance in learners' lives (Gee, 2004; Oblinger, 2005), that it exists to 'enforce control rather than enhance learning' (Nair & Gehling, 2008, p. 24) and that schools find it 'very difficult to realise that there are other literacies outside the classroom.' (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8). Pressure falls to schools and teachers to acknowledge the need for change, to understand the broadened definition of literacy (Leu, 2002; Leu & Coiro, 2004; Reinking, Labbo, & McKenna, 2000) and to embrace opportunities to design learning experiences that authentically reflect the community practices within which learners are (and will) be expected to participate.

Whilst the cited literature is critical of schools and their ability to provide what is needed, teachers are recognised for their pedagogical expertise and their ability to meet learners' needs. For example, Judson (2006) points to teacher expertise as the key element in being able to observe classroom learning experiences, make inferences about the value of the learning and then facilitate the adjustments necessary to achieve the desired results. Similarly, Labbo (2005, p. 782) argues that teachers are well equipped to move 'from the tried and true to the new' as they explore new literacies through practices that have been proven pedagogically sound over time within the context of this new setting. Conflicting observations about schools and teachers in the literature coupled with the complexity of designing and teaching creates a challenging and somewhat confusing environment for teachers.

Teaching is governed by policy that mandates the types of learning experiences (and sometimes the specific content) that must be taught in classrooms. Whilst this can be considered supportive in that it provides a framework within which teachers can apply their expertise, the documents represent the distillation (or interpretation) of theory through policy writers, which require then further interpretation by the classroom teacher. The result is a range of understandings between teachers about what various terms mean and what teaching them entails. For example, the New South Wales Board of Studies English Syllabus requires teachers to use assessment strategies that '…give students opportunities to demonstrate, in an authentic manner, what they know and understand about language as well as what they can do.' (BOS, 1998, p. 87). What 'in an authentic manner' means to a range of people in a range of settings remains unclear, as do the assessment strategies. In more recent documentation, teachers are expected to incorporate literacy across curriculum areas as they '…develop students' appropriateness, accuracy, confidence, fluency and efficacy in the use of English across a growing range of authentic and increasingly complex and unfamiliar settings' (National Curriculum Board, 2008a, p. 12). Similarly, teachers of History must '…ensure that rich, effective and authentic teaching and learning occurs' (National Curriculum Board, 2008b, p. 19). Conversely, teachers of Science are to '…structure their teaching in ways that enable students to meld general life competencies with the understanding and skills needed to achieve scientific capabilities.' (National Curriculum Board, 2008c, p. 5). We argue that 'general life competencies' operate within 'authentic and increasingly complex and unfamiliar settings'.

How teachers conceptualise authentic learning in the classroom is the focus of this paper. The term *authentic learning experiences* is used to describe the learning opportunities that teachers design that aim to facilitate participation in the ordinary practices and events of a group. The paper is framed by the following questions:

How do experienced teachers define authentic learning?
What guides experienced teachers as they design authentic learning experiences?
What can other teachers learn from these stories to guide their own planning of authentic learning experiences?

Locating a theoretical framework

In analysing the data multiple lenses are adopted; Herrington and Oliver's (2000) principles of authentic learning experiences are used in conjunction with literacy practices (Street, 1995) and literacy events (Heath, 1983). This theoretical framework affords opportunities to make connections between teachers' pedagogical expertise, their intentions in facilitating literacy learning with their students and the ways that these experiences can encourage transfer of knowledge and understanding beyond the classroom setting.

Herrington and Oliver (2000) define authentic learning experiences as those that incorporate a number of principles in their design. Learning experiences that incorporate these principles can be described as *authentic* in that they aim to demonstrate the knowledge and skill within a real setting and allow the learner to make connections between the school setting and the demands of their broader communities. Authentic learning experiences:

- Provide authentic contexts that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real life
- Provide opportunities for exploration; they will be complex and ill defined, as they occur in real life
- Provide access to expert performances and the modelling of processes
- Provide multiple roles and perspectives
- Support collaborative construction of knowledge
- Promote reflection to enable abstractions to be formed
- Promote articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit
- Provide coaching by the teacher at critical times, and scaffolding and fading of teacher support
- Provide for authentic, integrated assessment of learning within the tasks (Herrington & Oliver, 2000, p. 26).

The principles of authentic learning emerged from reviews of literature and research conducted with participants engaging with technology based learning environments (Herrington & Herrington, 2006). The focus in these previous inquiries of authentic learning was primarily on the role of technology in creating the learning environment. However, we argue they have much to offer primary teachers in understanding what "authentic" means in planning for literacy learning in the primary classroom.

As such, the principles of authentic learning experiences are further focused in this inquiry through the theories of literacy practices and literacy events. Street (1995) argues that operating within a community requires members to participate in certain practices that are particular to that community. The practices of a community have as their purpose the achievement of broad social goals (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and these are achieved through literacy events. Literacy events are the reading, writing, talking and listening that are integral to the interactions within the community and the interpretation of meaning (Heath, 1983). Events carry with them different expectations and processes depending on the domain within which they occur. Barton and Hamilton (2000) use cooking as an example of a literacy event that has different expectations within different practices; cooking at home for the family requires a different set of behaviours and routines than when working as a chef in an exclusive restaurant and different again from those required on a weekend camping trip.

The authentic learning principles provide a framework of analysis for teachers' planning and design of classroom experiences that facilitate the development of deep and flexible knowledge that can be applied to suit a range of community practices. Further, the frame provides a lens to examine how the experienced teachers make sense of and translate the complex jargon associated with their profession into their practice.

Methodology

These data were collected as part of a larger inquiry into the ways that primary teachers conceptualise authentic learning experiences in their classrooms. Data reported in this paper represent interviews conducted early in the inquiry with experienced teachers. Experienced teachers are defined in the literature as having in excess of five years teaching experience and their teaching is characterised by confidence, flexibility and a willingness to experiment with a range of pedagogical approaches (Fetherston, 2007; Marsh, 2000). These participants were considered appropriate for this early phase of the inquiry, as their experience both in the classroom and in interpreting the complex literature discussed earlier would be valuable for informing later phases in the larger inquiry.

In the larger inquiry, eight experienced classroom teachers were recruited using snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) where the interviewed teacher was asked to recommend a colleague who may also be willing to participate in an interview. For the purposes of this paper, the tasks developed and implemented by four of these teachers will be examined. A strength of snowball sampling in this instance was that each of the participant teachers was identified by a colleague (rather then the researchers) as a skilled teacher with expertise in classroom practice. It also provided the researchers with access to school contexts and teachers beyond their own professional networks. Each teacher's identified area of expertise varied, as did their school setting and the positions they held in their schools. Summarised in Table 1 are the four teachers' roles in their school and their identified areas of expertise.

Data were analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where each piece of data is considered within the context of the individual participant's data and then across the whole data set. The non linear nature of the constant comparative method allows the researcher to revisit the data to consider categories in connection with newly collected evidence and, in this case, with the principles of authentic learning.

Table 1 – Teachers and their expertise

Experienced classroom	Role in the school at the	Teaching experience	Self identified expertise

(pseudonym)	inquiry		
Daphne	- 2 stream school - Executive teacher - Teaching Year 2	19 years	'…the experience that I bring from working with people in other schools. The different people I've had a chance to teach with who I've actually learnt a lot from.'
Tonia	- Assistant Principal of a 3 stream school - Literacy support teacher	14 years	'…my problem solving skills…I have a strong sense of social justice and it really peeves me to see people talking about… [children being disadvantaged]. I don't like the deficit model so I am a champion of lost causes. I put into play my problem solving skills to see how these children can fulfil their potential.'
Keith	- 2 stream school - Principal, previously held other executive roles in this school	25 years	'…a clear understanding of what the purpose is behind it [a learning experience]…something meaningful for the children. There's no use in them finding out about topics of interest if they don't know how it makes a difference in their lives.'
Stan	- 2 Stream School - Technology support teacher (staff and students) - Teaching Year 3	6 years	'I try and get the staff and students doing the stuff the kids are interested in, [and] not having these formal lessons but just using the computers all the time. So that's my main role.'

Findings

The teachers were interviewed about the sorts of considerations they make as they conceptualise and design experiences that take the learning beyond the confines of the classroom and into their communities. Each of the teachers shared their motivation and inspiration in planning and facilitating learning in their classrooms and described an example of an activity that they considered provided authentic learning experiences. For each teacher, we describe:

- An example of their classroom practice
- Connections within the example to authentic learning experiences
- Discussion in connection with the literacy practices and events framework.

Teacher: Daphne

Students: Early primary

Location: South Western Sydney

Population: high multicultural, low socio economic, *'open to a whole lot of experiences'*, *'they're just happy with whatever we do'*

Authentic learning is *'…using all your senses to take in the environment. To take in everything that's on offer to help you to understand the world…it's not about learning your timetables or anything like that, it's more knowing how to survive in the world, giving children survival skills to get through life'*

Task: **Waste not, want not**

- To investigate food waste and its potential for recycling through composting and worm farms
- To share the composting message with audiences beyond the classroom through the construction of a range of texts, written and oral

Process:

i. Teacher and children investigated rubbish around their playground. They designed questions, interviewed and listened to "experts" from within and outside the school talking about their role in recycling and reusing.

ii. They constructed arguments and engaged in discussions (both written and oral) exploring the pros and cons of recycling food waste and identified the different possibilities for recycling in a range of settings.

iii. The children created texts (posters, pamphlets and more extended texts) encouraging others to recycle their food scraps through composting and worm farms not only for school, but also in the home and broader community. These were displayed in ways that reached these audiences.

Assessment:

Analysis of content knowledge of the benefits of composting evident in students' texts

Literacy focus: construction of message; understanding of different demands in different settings; use of appropriate/technical language, structure and layout for intended audience.

Connections to principles of authentic learning

This activity drew on the principles of authentic learning in a number of ways. The complexity of the problem of reducing and reusing putrescible matter allows learners to consider a range of possibilities in forming solutions. Expertise from a range of people allowed the children to consider the problem in settings beyond the classroom,

empowering them to make decisions not only for their school, but also within the broader contexts where the problem also occurs. This knowledge directly informed the texts that the students constructed in conveying their understandings.

Literacy practices and literacy events

Recycling through composting is a common practice. The activities in this example built knowledge about sustainability and its application across a range of settings. It explored the different expectations for behaviour within them. The creation of texts to promote composting (the event) and the research, planning and creation of a worm farm allowed the children to participate in the practices of their own communities as informed members promoting change not only within their immediate settings of home and school, but in the wider community as well.

Programming considerations

"Waste not, want not" highlights the potential for children to explore different perspectives of a problem and the range of expectations that exist within different practices. The use of expertise from these settings allowed the problem to be appreciated from these multiple perspectives, for example, the school waste monitors' approaches and solutions would clearly differ from the ways compost is handled in the home and differ again from a local council approach. Gathering a range of perspectives promotes a greater understanding of problems within their contexts, allows for exploration of solutions in specific settings and for specific purposes and potentially develops the skills and strategies required for children to engage with the literate demands of their individual community groupings.

Teacher: Tonia

Students: Early primary
Location: Southern Illawarra
Population: high multicultural, low socio economic, *'a lot of kids that need that individual care',* many parents do not speak English
Authentic learning is *'…relationships, once you have that relationship…you get the best out of kids. It has to be trusting, it has to be mutual, it has to be honest. Learning for me is not all about ABCs, it's about learning about how to be in this world and learning who to be and learning that you are important…that you are valued.'*

Task: **Mothers' Day Poetry**

- To make a gift for their Mothers on Mothers' Day
- To compose poetry that uses similes and figurative language, publish and present to parents

Process:

    i.   The teacher used a series of shared and guided writing and talking/listening

episodes to build vocabulary and to teach the concept of similes and figurative language.

ii. In guided reading groups, the children deconstructed figurative language and created some of their own in connection with the characteristics and traits of their own Mothers.

iii. In close consultation with their teacher, texts were drafted, edited, published and presented to their mothers for Mothers day.

Assessment:

Analysis of writing samples against literacy indicators

Literacy focus: use of linguistic devices, appropriate language choices (accuracy of description of the parent), layout and structure of text.

Connections to principles of authentic learning

The experience was motivated by a calendar event that was familiar to the students. Composing poetry for a loved one is a reflection of a way that poetry is used in 'real' life. In this example, the teacher provides expertise, modelling, coaching and scaffolding through guided, whole class and independent activities. Understandings were developed and then transferred as the students learned about figurative language and then combined this to their existing knowledge as they explored the choices for expression of their feelings about their mothers. Analysis of the finished product as well as drafts of work in progress embedded the assessment of the writing process into the task.

Literacy practices and literacy events

Participating in social practices is an important part of belonging to a community. The ability to: create texts that express the relationships between members; explore their characteristics; and that identify ones place in that community is empowering indeed. Participating in the important events within a practice such as Mothers' Day affirms and enriches that membership; it supports Tonia's desire to help children to learn about 'how to be' and 'who to be in this world'.

Programming considerations

This example promotes a simpler perspective of authentic learning. The focus of the task is a regular one with which many teachers engage children. Deconstructing texts containing figurative language alongside considerations about the purpose of the task and its intended audience afforded not only creativity in the composition, but also contributed to the children's ability to interpret other more complex texts. This direct deconstruction and reconstruction of figurative language within an authentic experience supports the oral and written English development for all learners, those with English as a second language as well as native English speakers, an important skill in interpreting text.

Teacher: Keith

Students: Middle primary

Location: South Western Sydney

Population: high multicultural, low socio economic, *'these children want to make a difference in the world'*

What is authentic learning? *'…there has to be something meaningful for the children. I don't think there's any use in them finding out about topics of interest if they don't know how it makes a difference in their lives. So how is that understanding going to help other people with their understanding?'*

Task: **Bike Safety**

- To learn about bike safety and then create a useful resource on bike safety for younger children

Process:

i. Teacher and children explore the elements of bike safety, using modelling through video footage, teacher and child demonstration and observation. Teacher led discussion promotes their responsibility for their own safety and their obligation to remind others within their communities to stay safe as well.

ii. Teacher and children deconstruct texts for children in the lower primary setting and identify their features (for example, images to support text, carefully placed text, the "right" amount of text on a page, appropriate language choices)

iii. In pairs and small groups, children construct bike safety texts for younger students using their knowledge of both the elements of bike safety and their knowledge about texts for younger readers.

Assessment:

Demonstration and application of bike safety knowledge to inform others

Literacy focus: an understanding of the purpose of the resource and its intended audience; understanding of the text features for younger readers; text layout and structure of the resource.

Connections to principles of authentic learning

Many teachers feel the pressure to incorporate community focuses into the classroom curriculum. This is an interesting task as it draws on the role of the community member as teacher and learner, expert and novice; as they developed their understandings, the children were the novices, but then adopted a more authoritative role as they educated younger children about bike safety. The middle primary children in this example are given opportunity to transform and explicitly articulate their own knowledge to coach and support the knowledge of less experienced others through the creation of powerful texts.

Literacy practices and literacy events

The opportunity for children to reframe their knowledge about bike riding and bike safety carries with it both personal and practical consequences. The demonstration of deep knowledge affirms membership, whilst the increased responsibility of helping less knowledgeable others enhances their status as a valued member of the community and contributes to the collective knowledge of the group.

Programming considerations

The bike safety task highlights the value of providing opportunities for both the consumption and construction of texts in developing in children the ability to inform, support and influence others within their communities. Time spent gathering information is certainly important in developing content knowledge, but it is the commitment of the classroom teacher to providing extended time for children to interpret and express their knowledge through the creation of such texts as the Bike Safety texts that evidence of deep learning is revealed.

Teacher: Stan

 Students: Upper primary

 Location: Southern Sydney

 Population: predominantly Protestant Anglo Saxon, high socio economic, highly engaged in extra curricular activities, *'really well behaved and really well mannered... in the main part really keen to learn'*

Authentic learning is *'…giving children the skills they need to empower them to learn on their own, to give them the knowledge they need so they can take ownership and control of their learning and to learn independently of me and everyone else. To learn what they want to learn and to have a lot of different strategies and to know a lot of different ways to learn… learning is communal, learning should be shared and you learn a lot more with others than by yourself…share what they know, teach each other, present what they know to others inside and outside the classroom, inside and outside the school.'*

Task: **Baker's Doughlight**

- To explore, design, set up and run a bread making business

Process:

i. The children and teacher worked in whole class, small group, paired and individual groupings as they investigated, baked, tested, advertised and produced sourdough bread, selling it to the general public.

ii. Expertise was accessed as required, for example, an accountant taught them to use spreadsheets (and the Help function in the software) for the tracking of profit and loss. The teacher, himself an experienced small business operator, shared his experiences in customer service and the children and teacher visited a local

bakery

iii. Business meetings required agendas and reports as problems were solved (such as meeting increasing customer demand and a customer complaint) and goals set for future production.

Assessment:

Ongoing observation throughout the process and analysis of products (bread, advertising, progress reports, agenda, budgets etc)

Literacy focus: critique of marketing texts through deconstruction and analysis, identifying their purpose and intention; selecting appropriate text, layout and structure for a range of audiences; use of language to persuade, to inform, to promote a product; oral language skills of negotiation, compromise and articulation of ideas.

Connections to principles of authentic learning

This task draws together the principles of authentic learning as it allows the children to research the problem, identify a range of solutions, explore the most appropriate one for their class group, put the plan into action, reflect on the plan and identify new solutions. The range of events within the business called for a range of texts to be created, for example, logo design, marketing, pricing, advertising, monitoring profit and loss and allocation of funds and its success was evident in the sales figures and quality of the bread.

Literacy practices and literacy events

The events within this task were shaped by the aims and priorities of the group. As considerations were made about the product and the conduct of the business, the children needed to meet community expectations about quality, delivery and price. As the customers were not 'friends' of the school (ie not parents or other children), pressure came to bear on the children as valid and accountable community members. The teacher, too, contributed to the common understandings of the group, he drew on his own expertise in identifying learning experiences for the children in the class.

Programming considerations:

Stan expressed the desire to help his students to learn 'independently of me and everyone else'. He described Baker's Doughlight as the type of experience that develops independence in learning for a purpose beyond school, 'they just got a better sense of what it means to be a citizen, a corporate citizen, a consumer, a customer…'. This task uses the principles of authentic learning to develop in the children the skills, strategies and understandings needed for participation in life beyond the classroom. Whilst this is a more complex authentic learning experience, requiring greater planning, the benefits too are considerable. Identification of the expertise present within the teaching staff, parent and student body allows for a range of experiences to be designed that allow for the exploration of literacy beyond the classroom setting.

Principles for planning and implementing authentic literacy learning experiences

Each example explores authentic learning as perceived by experienced classroom practitioners. The examples reflect the complexity of the term 'authentic' as well as the complexity of classroom teaching. The familiarity of some of the tasks provides comfort in the acknowledgement of existing teacher expertise as identified in the literature (Judson, 2006; Labbo, 2005), whilst the newness of others is a challenge to embrace the broadened nature of literacy and to consider the relevance of the learning experiences on offer at school (Comber & Reid, 2006; Nair & Gehling, 2008; Oblinger, 2005). From our analysis of the stories we have shared, four key considerations emerge for teachers as they plan and facilitate authentic experiences in their own classrooms.

1. Authentic learning experiences draw on the personal strengths of the teacher

It was each teacher's vision for learning that underpinned the tasks they designed. Daphne described learning as 'making sense of the world' and her task supported this as the children explored and created texts around management of waste. Similarly, Tonia's desire that the children learn 'who to be in this world' is reflected in the Mothers' Day task as they engaged with oral and written texts to explore their place as someone's daughter/son. The expertise of the teacher is key to the engagement of children in relevant learning experiences that facilitate deep understandings of their communities.

2. Authentic learning experiences demonstrate an awareness of the events and practices that the learners engage with in their own communities

The examples shared reflect the teachers' knowledge of the communities to which the children belong. They vary in complexity and therefore the required commitment of time and resources to exploring the problem. Stan and Daphne's experiences required a considerable commitment of time and resources as multiple problems were explored, approaches selected and solutions posed. Tonia and Keith's tasks were no less deep in terms of thinking and interpretation, but adopted a narrower focus in solving a problem. This supports Herrington and Oliver's (2000) argument that authentic learning experiences reflect the ways that knowledge is used within real life; not all events are multidimensional and require multiple solutions, reminding us as teachers that the experiences we design can take a range of approaches.

3. Authentic learning experiences acknowledge the social nature of literate practices

The examples shared in this paper reflect the social nature of literacy learning. Each of the tasks challenged children's thinking in reading or viewing and then in creating texts for a

range of purposes and in consideration of the intended audience. For example, in composing their poetry, each child needed to consider their own relationship with their Mother along with her traits as they made appropriate comparisons through simile. The students in Keith's bike safety task considered the language, structure and layout of their texts that could convey their intended meaning to younger children. This approach acknowledges the range of expectations of different communities and the need for the members to be able to flexibly apply their knowledge and understandings to genre and text structure in accordance with these in creating their own texts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

4. Authentic learning experiences capitalise on the resources available

Each of the teachers utilised the available resources within their personal, professional and school communities. For example, although economic barriers prevented Daphne from taking the children to different locations within their communities, she was able to bring the experience to them through visits from community members and still achieve her aim to empower children as environmentalists. Keith, too, capitalised on limited resources, as bikes were a common possession amongst his students and the culture of riding to school was prevalent within that community. While teachers have professional knowledge of pedagogy and curriculum, it is critical that they also look to the resources within the social and cultural contexts within which they operate.

Concluding reflections

As teachers consider the broadened nature of literacy teaching today, they are called to bring together a range of competing tensions in designing learning experiences that meet the needs of their learners as they interpret the complex, and often loaded, jargon of the profession. These four teacher stories, coupled with the principles of authentic learning experiences are useful in guiding teachers as they plan experiences that develop in their learners the ability to participate in, contribute to and enrich the communities to which they belong. Situating these within the theories of literacy events and literacy practices provides scope to consider and interpret the complexity of the literacy skills, strategies and knowledge required within the experiences.

Considering the literacy demands of individual school contexts, the students' own communities, the expectations of stakeholders in a child's education and the availability of resources are integral for the conceptualisation, planning and implementation of any "authentic" experience.

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