

One School's Journey: Using Multiliteracies to Promote School Renewal

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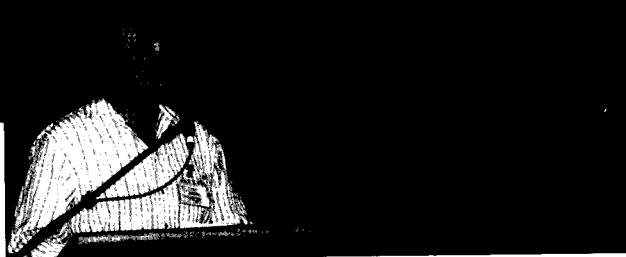
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The rapid change in society and technology and its implications for literacy education can be overwhelming. Many of us find it difficult to identify where to start, but all of us are aware that our pedagogy and our knowledge about literacy need to change to keep pace, and more importantly, to ensure our students are equipped to engage in literate futures. One approach is to identify a common goal or focus for a group and for individuals to pursue particular aspects of it in terms of their needs and current levels of understanding. The group provides support and the individual projects enable personal goals to be met as well.

This article reports on one school's journey in which multiliteracies became a common focus for investigation by the school. In 2004 Fairview Heights State School decided that in order to develop a school-wide approach to literacy, staff needed to embark on shared, but individual projects on multiliteracies with a focus on pedagogy, practice and validation of change. All teachers, including specialists, engaged in The Multiliteracies Project involving individual action learning projects focussed around multiliteracies. These projects included professional learning sessions for the exchange of knowledge and challenges, professional reading, audiotaping and analysis of transcripts of lessons, and presenting an oral and written report validating their learning and change in pedagogy and practice over the eight month period.

The results were outstanding, as not only did teachers increase their knowledge and understandings, but pedagogies changed and the collegial conversations that emerged during the process resulted in school renewal. In the words of the Principal, Mark Bolitho, 'We went from a congenial school [focussing on friendships and birthdays] to a collegial school [engaging in conversations that focus on professional knowledge and learning].'



Michèle and Geoff presented this research at PPPQ2005

Design of the Project

When we began designing the project with the school the goals were to:

- Gain a greater understanding of multiliteracies
- Develop and practise self reflective techniques within the area of multiliteracies
- Develop and implement strategies to improve pedagogical practices
- Develop an understanding of leadership and the change process
- Develop an environment of trust where teachers could evaluate their multiliteracies practices honestly and confidently at the beginning and end of the project
- Use specific tools that would genuinely validate the progress made by teachers
- Develop mechanisms that would support teachers throughout the project.

The following components were central to the project:

- The first professional development day of the project was concerned with developing shared understandings about multiliteracies and an introduction to the Multiliteracies Matrix, a self-reflective tool designed to aid teachers in making judgements about their knowledge of multiliteracies and their pedagogical practices in the classroom.
- Core and self-selected professional reading and annotated reading logs were encouraged.
- The second day of professional development provided time for teachers to translate their Multiliteracies Matrix into an Action Plan to improve and validate change in their multiliteracy practices. All action plans had to

include audiotaping and transcribing lessons to analyse pedagogy and track change.

- As teachers worked on their projects a variety of support systems were provided, including specific follow-up days or afternoons with us to review progress and talk through issues.
- On Validation Day all teachers used their Matrix and Action Plan as a basis for a report on the progress they had made to the rest of the group. The focus was on providing evidence to validate the changes that had occurred in their knowledge, pedagogy and practice.

The Multiliteracies Matrix (designed by Anstey and Bull) consists of twenty-four items about multiliteracies. It is designed to assist teachers in determining their current literacy knowledge and practice in the three areas of text, context and pedagogy, using a five point self-rating scale. Teachers then select two or three items and consider what action they might take to improve their self-rating (goal-setting). This enabled each participant to individualise their project and to incorporate it into their classroom contexts. Justification of each individual rating and of selection of items for the classroom project was seen as an important method for ensuring that each teacher engaged in detailed reflection before selecting an area for investigation. An Action Plan was used to support teachers in planning toward the achievement of their personal goals. Teachers used it to identify their goal, the actions to be taken and how they would collect data to measure change in their knowledge, pedagogy and practice.

Outcomes

1. *Change in Pedagogy*

All teachers identified an aspect of their pedagogy that they would focus upon. One way in which they were required to examine their pedagogy was to tape a lesson, transcribe and analyse it. This task caused the most pain to begin with, but as people completed their transcripts and they realised how much information it provided them about their teaching they began to get excited. Some actually completed several more, comparing and contrasting them. As Lindy Abawi, the music specialist, said: 'The most difficult turn around for many of us to come to grips with was the need to focus not on our student outcomes but on our own teaching style and to identify weaknesses so we could concentrate on strengthening our teaching technique. Most definitely the focus was on us and the process, rather than on our students and the end result.'

The following three examples, from teachers' presentations on validation day provide insight as to how the focus on pedagogy changed teachers'

practice, improved their relationships with students' and encouraged students' to take more responsibility for their learning.

Lorraine Davidson and Joy Young focussed on making their talk with students more explicit by remembering to explain the how, what, when and why of their literacy teaching. They found their planning for teaching changed as they implemented this. The students' response was to take more responsibility in their learning and to engage more deeply with tasks. This was evident as students began to mimic the 'how, what, when and why' in conversations about their learning.

Fiona Caffery and Tess Minogue also focussed on explicit language but had difficulty analysing their initial transcript until they realised 'that the focus is what you are doing rather than what are the children doing.' They began to focus on how they used language with their students, attempting to reduce the mismatch between what they said and what students heard. They noticed that the students' behaviour changed as their language changed and the locus of control shifted in the classroom. Students began to think more about what Fiona and Tess were saying and how it was affecting their understanding and learning. This was evident when students asked for clarification, for example 'You aren't being explicit enough, could you put it another way so I can understand' and 'But you didn't listen to my question, I just wanted to know...' As Fiona and Tess commented the relationship between students and teachers changed, and the building of trust and respect became very important. These quotes from students could be seen as cheekiness, but in this context they are evidence of teachers and students genuinely engaging in learning together.

Karen Jensen focussed on developing a metalanguage that would enable her to talk more explicitly about still images with her students. She summarised her initial analyses of her transcript as follows: 'Not a great deal of sustained exchange. When I wasn't sure of where I was going I fell back into IRE [Initiation Response Evaluation pattern of questioning]. There was very little extension that built on student responses. Children had inadequate language for expressing their views clearly.'

As well as introducing the metalanguage for still images, Karen used the Four Resource Model to guide her planning of lessons and gradually moved more control and responsibility to the students. Gradually she noticed that the focus of discussion in the classroom changed as students talked more about their learning to each other rather than always through teacher directed discussion.

She summarised the changes in her classroom thus:

The classroom layout changed, it was no longer necessary to keep students in rows to control behaviour. Shared reading discussions became student driven and students used metalanguage in their dialogue. My planning changed in that I now make and use time for both learning and sharing work (learning). My language is more specific. The students use and talk about the strategies we are learning.

2. *Change in knowledge about literacy*

As teachers developed knowledge about specific aspects of multiliteracies they became more confident and excited about their learning. A group of teachers returned from a seminar on the new Arts Syllabus and reported with delight about their ability to explain about semiotic systems to others present when a participant asked a question of the presenter.

Another teacher, who had been studying the codes and conventions of still images for work with her upper school class, recounted a recent experience at an art gallery. During the school holidays she had been looking at the pictures in the gallery and discussing them with her husband to practice applying the concepts and using the terminology. Another person in the gallery tapped her on the shoulder and asked her how she knew all this and where could she find out more, because it really helped her look at the exhibition. The teacher was astonished that she had learned so much and that she could explain it so well to others. She found that when she came to use it with her students she was far more confident and better able to explain concepts to them because she could draw upon her own learning experience. This same teacher found a similar pattern in students learning, their prior knowledge and the resources they brought to the lesson were as critical as those that she, as the teacher, used in the lesson.

Pauline Newton, the pre-school teacher found that she needed to think differently about knowledge. As she learned about the analysis of still images and the codes and conventions associated with it, she thought these concepts too sophisticated for her pre-schoolers. What she found was that they were quite capable of analysing and discussing colour, line and texture, but had more difficulty with concepts such as shape and form. She found that it was the way in which she explicitly taught these concepts that influenced learning, that her knowledge and understanding needed to be deep and flexible enough to enable her to approach the teaching of it in ways that were appropriate for pre-schoolers.

Similarly Trish MacDonald commented: 'When I was sure of what I was doing students were able to

engage more and I had less discipline problems.'

The relationship between teacher knowledge, planning and pedagogy became a focus of almost all teachers' reports on validation day. Most commented in some way that the more comfortable with and knowledgeable about the concepts they were teaching, the more focussed their planning became and consequently their language and pedagogy became more explicit. The results: more attentive and interested students, who took more responsibility and engaged in deeper reflective learning, less behavioural problems and happier teachers!

3. *Growth in collegial conversation: School renewal*

One of the more unexpected outcomes of the project was the overall effect on the school as a learning community. Mark Bolitho, principal of Fairview Heights, reflected on this and concluded that:

We had been a very social school, what I would term collegial. We remembered each others' birthdays and looked after one another socially. But there were some issues. Gradually during the project the focus or conversations moved from a focus on us [socially] to the kids and learning. When we were talking about learning outcomes, our own teaching, reflecting on our teaching, observing ourselves and investing in ourselves, the energy shifted; we found we had a whole lot more in common.

This is not to say the project was all smooth sailing; the teachers engaged in a lot of work, reading widely, analysing transcripts collecting and analysing data and preparing and giving an oral presentation on validation day. There were times when people felt stressed and really needed support. But as Mark observes:

The project enabled people who were already moving along that path [multiliteracies] to run with it, but it also enabled me [and the Deputy Principal] to work with those who found it more difficult ... No-one was on their own, people worked in year level groups, teaching teams, blocks, areas of common interest ... The content and level of conversations changed in the staffroom.

Validation Day was a significant day for everyone as all shared their learning and the real outcomes of the project became apparent. Mark summarises it as follows:

The barriers came down, there was real honesty as people said, 'Sure I have strengths, but this is what I needed to improve, this is what I learned and how I can apply this new learning in other areas. This day was one of the most magic moments of my career as a principal.

And from one of the teachers, Lindy Abawi, a further observation about the effect of the project on the whole school as a learning community: The Validation Day was a day of great excitement, relief, collegiality, humour, learning and celebration. To see our fellow teachers' best practice in action was not only a great learning session but an inspiring and bonding experience for all. There was not one teacher who did not feel an immense sense of pride and satisfaction about what we had achieved as individuals and as a staff.

Conclusion

This was an inspiring project to be a part of and the success was largely due to the hard work, enthusiasm and dedication of the teachers and principal involved. However our work with this school and many others leads us to the conclusion that there are certain factors essential to successful professional development that leads to real and sustained changes in knowledge and pedagogy.

Projects should have the following characteristics:

- 1 Long term
- 2 Dual focus: attention to both literacy and pedagogy
- 3 Validation: participants must be required to identify ways of measuring change in their knowledge, pedagogy and practice, collect data and share it with colleagues
- 4 Action Learning: participants must identify personal goals, plan to meet them, take action and measure results
- 5 Flexibility within the structure: Projects must suit the goals of the particular learning community, and be responsive to the context and individual needs of participants
- 6 Collegial and self-reflective conversations must be encouraged at every stage of the projects: tasks such as the reflective tool (Multiliteracies Matrix), audiotaping of lessons and action planning provide contexts for such conversations.