Responding to rapid change: *multiliteracies and ICT*

Michèle Anstey and **Geoff Bull** consider whole-school responses to rapid change. They report on projects that have achieved substantial and sustained growth in knowledge, pedagogy and practice.

Rapid change in society and technology and its implications for literacy education can be overwhelming. The impact of information and communication technology (ICT) is not only challenging in terms of personal knowledge and use, but also in terms of teaching. Students must both master the technologies themselves and understand the impact of these technologies on social behaviours, culture and communication. Seeing technology as social and literate practice requires us to make changes to our pedagogy, and our views about ICT and literacy. To equip students for literate futures, change must occur at a whole-school level, as well as at the individual and classroom level.

An issue for schools embracing change at a whole-school level is balancing the needs of individuals with school-wide initiatives. One way to achieve this is to identify a common goal or focus for the school and for individuals to pursue particular aspects of it in terms of their needs and current levels of understanding. The group focus provides for whole-school development and provision of support structures, while the individual projects enable personal goals to be met.

A multiliteracies approach focuses on globalisation, rapid social change, the impact of technology and changing literate practices; it is an ideal context for introducing a school-wide focus on ICT. Groups of teachers in Queensland have been engaged in projects that investigate multiliteracies.

The Multiliteracies Projects have involved voluntary groups of primary and secondary teachers in state, independent and catholic systems at a regional, network and school level. Projects have also been conducted as a whole-school initiative in three schools—two primary and one P–12.
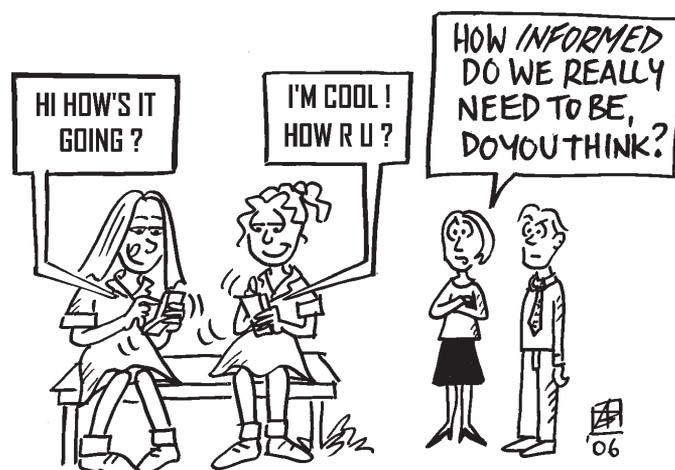
Participants were involved in individual classroom-based action learning projects focused around multiliteracies. They were involved in:
- professional learning sessions for the exchange of knowledge and challenges
- professional reading, reflection and action
- audio-taping and analysis of transcripts of lessons
- formulation and implementation of individual action learning projects
- validation and sharing of learning.

The results of all projects have been significant, some outstanding. Teachers increased their knowledge and understandings, pedagogies changed and collegial conversations became more substantial. In situations where whole schools were involved, the process resulted in considerable school renewal.

Cartoons by Bev Aisbett
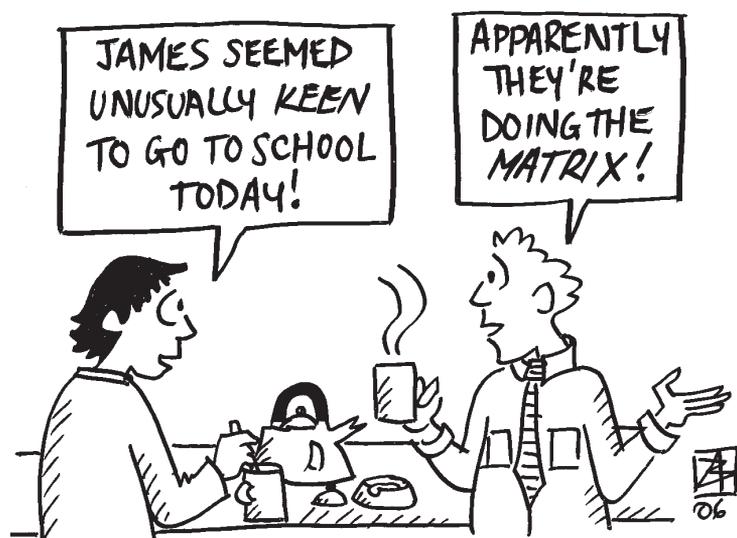
Design of the projects

Common goals included gaining a greater understanding of multiliteracies, and developing and practising self-reflective techniques within the area. Participants aimed to form and implement strategies to improve pedagogical practices, while building an understanding of leadership and the change process. Success required an environment of trust, so teachers could evaluate their multiliteracies practices honestly and confidently.

During two consecutive days of professional development, participants were introduced to the Multiliteracies Matrix (Bull and Anstey, 2004). This is a self-reflective tool with 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. It does this with a five-point self-rating scale. Participants justify the rating they have chosen.

Teachers select two or three items as goals for change, and then develop an action plan to incorporate them into their normal classroom program. This plan specifies the actions to be taken and data-collection methods to be employed for validating change in teacher knowledge, pedagogy and practice.

Outcomes of the Multiliteracies Projects

All teachers demonstrated deeper understanding of multiliteracies and the interface of planning, pedagogy and practice, particularly teacher-student interaction. They were also more discriminating in the use of ICT.

Teachers developed a metalanguage for talking about concepts and strategies that enabled them to talk more explicitly, as well as providing a language for students to talk about their learning. Participants remembered to explain the focus and purpose of learning episodes to students, they planned differently, specifying language and terminology to be used with students. They contextualised learning.

Units were delivered at a slower pace to promote depth of understanding, and teachers planned specific times for students to learn, discuss and share their experiences. Students responded to these changes in teacher practices by taking more responsibility for their learning and engaging more deeply with tasks.

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When the locus of control shifted from teachers to students, trust and respect increased.

Additionally, students talked more to each other about their learning, rather than relying on teacher-directed discussion. Their talk became more explicit, and students engaged in more substantive conversations.

Participants were also motivated to read extensively in their chosen research area, so were more knowledgeable about the concepts and content. The more focused their planning was, the more explicit their language and pedagogy became. Teachers remarked on the growth in collegial conversations and reported that seeing fellow teachers' best practice in action was an inspiring and bonding experience.

Implications for professional development

These were inspiring projects. Their success was largely due to the hard work, enthusiasm and dedication of the teachers and administrators involved. However, the projects suggest that certain factors are essential if professional development is to result in real and sustained changes in knowledge and pedagogy.

Projects should:

1. be long term.
2. have a dual focus: give attention to both literacy and pedagogy.
3. require participants to identify ways of measuring change in their knowledge, pedagogy and practice. They must collect data and share it with colleagues.
4. have action learning at its core. Participants must identify personal goals, plan to meet them, take action and measure results.
5. provide 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. encourage collegial and self-reflective conversations at every stage, using elements such as the reflective tool (Multiliteracies Matrix), audiotaping of lessons and action planning to provide contexts for such conversations. ℮

References

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