Literacy for Powerful Learning

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In the Australian Curriculum, literacy is considered an essential skill for preparing young people to become confident powerful learners who use literacy successfully in their lives. In secondary schools, much of the explicit teaching of literacy occurs in English classrooms; however, literacy needs to be reinforced, made explicit and extended as students engage in wide-ranging learning activities with subject-specific literacy demands in other learning areas. Therefore, pre-service and in-service teachers need a clear understanding of the literacy demands and possibilities of their learning area, and be able to plan how to teach specific language and literacy knowledge and skills fundamental to students' understanding of learning area content. Focusing on the literacy demands of each learning area ensures that students' literacy development is reinforced so that it supports subject-based learning area content.

In the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2012), literacy is considered an essential skill for preparing young people to become confident and *powerful learners* who use literacy effectively in their lives. For successful participation in local community or beyond, young people require communication and critical thinking skills. Teachers play a key role in designing *powerful* literacy practices that will enable students to be successful at school and prepared for effective participation in the workforce and community life (Gee, 1996). Likewise, teachers must engage students in *powerful learning* inclusive of stimulating and challenging literacy experiences (Luke, 2010), and resist lowering expectations or pedagogies linked to low expectations (Anyon, 2003).

Literacy educators recognise that students need to acquire a literacy that is dynamic and responsive, and inclusive of the basics of reading and writing, as well as the ability to engage with a gamut of communication media, audiences and subject matter. Such a dynamic view of literacy is replicated in the new *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2012), where literacy is classified as a *general capability,* involving students in 'listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts' (ACARA, 2012). In this new curriculum environment, students are required to "develop effective literacy practices as they develop in the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society"(ACARA, 2012). As a *capability*, literacy transcends the customary boundaries of the school curriculum. However, each learning area produces its own specialist language and literacy demands, which need to be made explicit. The implication is that teachers and students need a shared knowledge, and a shared language to talk about how language and literacy are used in different contexts; and, more specifically, how texts, grammar patterns and vocabulary are utilized in each learning area to meet the demands of that learning area.

In effect, all teachers are teachers of literacy (reading and writing) at all levels across all learning areas. All teachers require knowledge about all aspects of language and its use including sentence-level grammar, paragraph structure, different types of texts and contexts. It follows that teachers require a repertoire of strategies for using this knowledge to analyse student need, design teaching sequences and resources, monitor progress and

assess achievement. Teachers need to develop a repertoire of instructional strategies and resources to address the diverse needs of the students in their classrooms.

Being literate is the ability to communicate confidently and fluently with those who are not family members or members of familiar communities (Gee, 1996). In the high school years, however, becoming literate involves making sense of the literacy practices of each learning area. The literacy practices that students will need may be understood as a secondary Discourse, that is, "ways of behaving, valuing, thinking, communicating and interacting of a social group focused on a set of activities, priorities or interests" (Bartholomaeus, 2012). How confident and fluent students become in the secondary Discourses of the high school learning areas will usually predict success at school and beyond (Gee, 1996). Mastering the secondary Discourse of each learning area, therefore, requires mastering the literacy demands of the learning area.

In secondary schools, much of the explicit teaching of literacy occurs in English classrooms; however, it is widely agreed that literacy needs to be reinforced, made explicit and extended as students engage in widespread learning activities with subject-specific literacy demands in other learning areas. Therefore, pre-service and in-service teachers need a clear understanding of the literacy demands and opportunities of their learning area, and the need to be able to plan how to teach specific language and literacy knowledge and skills fundamental to students' understanding of learning area content.

Questions that guide this paper arise from my work with colleagues engaged in preparing pre-service teachers for this important and challenging work, and continuing to re-evaluate our work in light of new research – including our own research, for example, whole school literacy research partnerships with high schools, as mentioned in this paper.

1. How can we instill *literacy for powerful lea*rning in our secondary schools?
2. How do teacher education programs enable pre-service teachers to become teachers of *literacy for powerful learning*? How are pre-service teachers supported in building their knowledge about language and expanding their repertoires in ways that promote effective literacy teaching within their subject specific teaching areas?

Interrogation of the notion *literacy for powerful learning* invites several perspectives of teaching, for example, as it is enacted in planning, reflection, technology use, and assessment. Here, I reason that a *functional approach* concerned with how language functions to make meaning, advocated by ACARA and deployed by many Australian teacher education programs, has significantly influenced literacy education, transformed by evidence-based approaches and theories of knowledge structures of discipline learning within the sociology of education and associated social semiotic theories of language as a resource for meaning making, for example, Halliday (1992), Halliday and Martin (1993), Martin (1993), Martin & Veel (1998) and Christie and Maton (2011) in Australia. This literacy research was developed in the 1980s out of a lack of systematic and explicit teaching about language in schools at that time. Recently, through research partnerships with practicing teachers, *knowledge about language* (KAL) relevant to distinctive educational contexts has been mapped, and explicit and systematic approaches for teaching reading and writing in these contexts developed, approaches which have contributed to significant changes in literacy education in Australia and overseas

According to ACARA (2012), KAL is defined as 'a coherent, dynamic, and evolving body of knowledge about English language and how it works.' As each learning area is rolled out, teachers are being charged with applying KAL to program for the literacy

teaching and learning students will need in order to achieve expected curriculum outcomes. For example, teachers across the learning areas need to teach students how to compose texts for purposes of explanation, argument, description, and recollection (Derewianka & Jones, 2012). While teachers are deemed experts in their discipline area, it does not follow that each teacher can recognise, and explain explicitly, the language and literacy demands of their discipline area, nor that there exists a shared understanding among teachers about the nature of language and literacy development (F-12).

At the University of New England (UNE), pre-service teachers are provided with comprehensive knowledge about:

- the *content* of literacy e.g. knowledge about language (whole texts and paragraphs, words and grammar, and sound-letter correspondence), image and the context of language use;
- literacy *pedagogy* i.e. designing/selecting strategies and resources for teaching reading and writing, and sequencing these in principled, explicit and systematic ways (Feez, 2015).

Although pedagogically challenging to cater for the disciplinary literacy needs of K-12 pre-service teachers in one unit, a requirement of the university, teacher educators have effectively avoided a "one size fits all" approach to literacy instruction. This has been accomplished by designing content focused on students' knowledge of content and literacy pedagogy specific to literacy across the curriculum, and structures intended to model literacy practices and facilitate student learning about literacy instruction. At UNE, we proffer a *text-based* approach (Rose & Martin, 2012) or genre-based approach designed to make the language demands of the curriculum explicit "so that all students have access to the linguistic resources needed for success in school and to the powerful ways of using language in our culture" (Derewianka & Jones, 2012, p. 4). A *visible* pedagogy, it offers teachers a text-based teaching and learning framework that can be used to help their students 'understand how to structure discourse to meet educational … purposes, to critique what is presented to them and to mould genres to their own communicative purposes' (de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2012).

What does 'literacy for powerful learning' look like in high school contexts? Here, I provide an overview of a case study involving high school teachers engaged in *powerful* professional learning designed to build teacher capacity and improve writing outcomes for students. This regional high school chose a *text-based* pedagogy for developing a whole school approach to literacy across the curriculum. Academic partners from the local university were invited to deliver the professional learning and ongoing support. To initiate the intervention, teacher educators designed professional learning workshops for teachers of English, HSIE, Science and PDHPE since it was felt that these four learning areas assigned the greatest demands to student writing. Concurrently, a new syllabus in English, Science and Geography afforded the opportunity to embed literacy strategies into these three areas. In mid-2013, the Science and PDHP teaching teams and the English and HSIE teaching teams respectively attended a full-day workshop addressing the specific writing demands of their learning area. Early in 2014, the teacher educators were asked to provide two more workshops, specifically for the Industrial Arts and Mathematics teaching teams.

Each workshop began with a review of established goals, followed by teachers recording their perceptions of strengths and weaknesses related to their students' writing achievements, as well as their expectations and concerns related to the professional learning. Each teaching team subsequently reviewed the literacy demands of their learning area for Years 7 and 8, and identified the literacy learning needs of their students relative to these demands. Next they were provided with strategies for *scaffolding* the development of writing skills in their learning areas. The strategies were organised as a *cycle of teaching*

and learning, or literacy development cycle, through which students could build, gradually, knowledge about the structure of the target texts, the patterns of grammar and vocabulary used to compose these types of texts, and the skills needed to write these types of texts successfully. The workshop concluded with each teaching team using the three-stage literacy development cycle, and a repertoire of strategies provided by the teacher educators, to design sequences of activities for teaching writing they could embed in their units of work. This included preparing assessment tasks and assessment rubrics to monitor student progress and to assess student achievement. Teachers were also introduced to action research techniques to enable them to evaluate and amend the implementation of the literacy intervention as it unfolded. Last, teachers were asked to implement the literacy teaching sequences they had designed during the workshops before returning in Term 4 to share their learning at a Literacy Professional Learning Showcase.

Based on what we know, our efforts at promoting literacy for powerful learning are best directed at modelling for pre-service and in-service teachers a thoughtful, balanced approach to the teaching of reading and writing using evidence-based approaches, how to create a classroom climate where literacy flourishes, and how to support the diverse range of students in today's classrooms. We accept that there is an ongoing need for more fine-tuning of the literacy components of our courses, including, for example, problem solving ways of linking more effectively what we teach in the units with professional experience; enhancing students' knowledge of both content and pedagogy relative to literacy across the curriculum; and ongoing evaluation of our work embedded in our school-based research.

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