

Action Learning through Indigenous Literature

This paper reports on using action learning to investigate authentic voice in Indigenous literature. The setting is a new regional primary school in New South Wales, Australia. The school needed to get Aboriginal Education on the agenda, in line with the mandatory Aboriginal Education Policy (New South Wales Department of School Education, 1996). At the same time, the Prime Minister of Australia had just apologised on behalf of the government to the nation's Indigenous people for injustices of the past (Rudd, 2008). This was the micro and macro context that set the scene for the action learning project, "Action Learning through Indigenous literature", that took place during term two 2008.

Action Learning

The term action learning is commonly accepted to mean learning from action or concrete experience, and taking action as a result of this learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). Action research is the cyclical process which includes reflection in and on action (Schön, 1987). Further developments have added the notion of reflection for action which can act as a prelude to the action learning cycle (Grushka, Hinde- McLeod, & Reynolds, 2005). It is a "self reflective spiral" of planning, acting, observing then replanning, acting, observing (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 184).

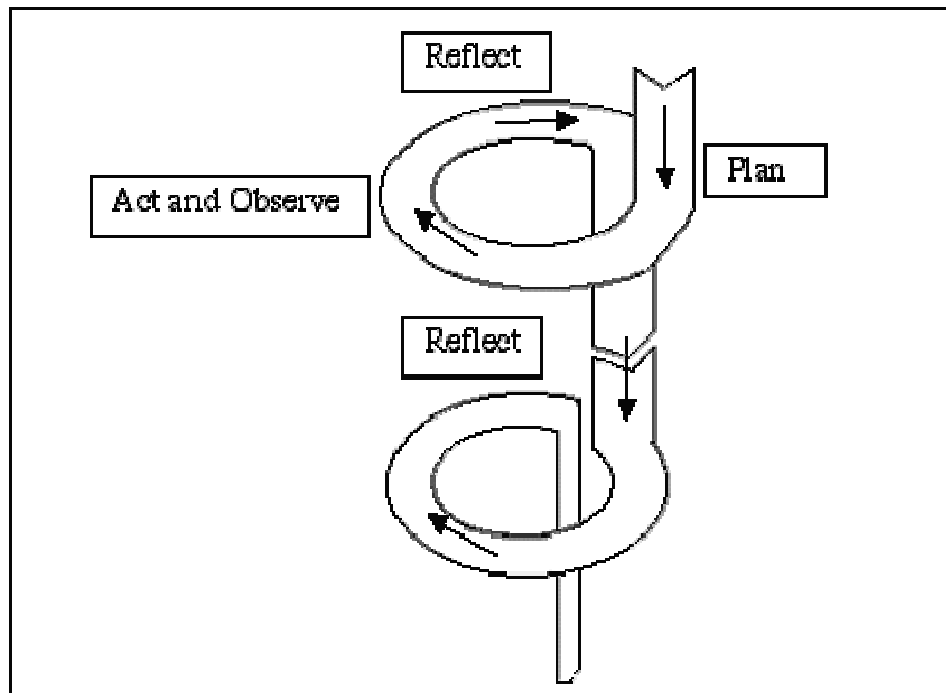


Figure 1: The Action Research Spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)

Catalysts for Learning

Within the theoretical construct of action learning, there were a number of triggers for the project. The school in which the project was based is new and teachers have been focusing on increasing culturally inclusive classroom practices, as a means of building a school culture that values individual differences and a fair go for all. There seemed to be some parental resistance to incorporating Aboriginal beliefs and understandings whilst establishing the school. This was evidenced by the reaction of some parents to the school proposal of naming sporting houses using the local Wanaruah Aboriginal language. This reaction was seen by staff to indicate that some parents' understandings in relation to Aboriginal culture, beliefs and issues were shallow.

The Aboriginal Education Policy (1996) emphasises the importance of understanding the links between the past and the present and how these links influence teaching and learning in schools now and in the future.

Statistical evidence that shows the significant literacy performance gap in NSW between Indigenous and non Indigenous students is of major concern to all educators. The gap between Indigenous and non Indigenous students continues to grow as students progress through school (Ministerial Council on Education, 2005, pp. 12-25). In 2005 in New South Wales, Australia; 81% of Indigenous students in Year Three achieved the reading benchmark, compared to 93% of non Indigenous students. In Year Five the same year, 72% of Indigenous students achieved the reading benchmark compared to 90% of non Indigenous students. The gap increased in Year Seven- 69% of Indigenous students achieved the reading benchmark compared to 88% of non Indigenous students. These confronting results indicate the proportion of Indigenous students achieving at or above benchmark levels continues to be significantly lower than for non Indigenous students (Ministerial Council on Education, 2005).

By ensuring all students understand and appreciate the rich and diverse cultural heritage that is Aboriginal Australia, from an Aboriginal perspective, teachers in schools may be able to be more successful in lessening the literacy performance gap between Indigenous and non Indigenous students. The action learning project aimed to deepen understanding through action learning using Indigenous children's picture books as the vehicle. This was the purpose of the study.

“Aboriginal education is not only the appropriate education of Aboriginal students but also must involve the education of all Australian students about Indigenous Australia. Participation and outcomes of Aboriginal students will improve when Indigenous cultures, history and contemporary issues are integral to the curriculum for all students”

(New South Wales Department of School Education, 1996, p. 4).

The Prime Minister's Sorry Statement on 13 February (Rudd, 2008) was profound and timely, but difficult for young children to understand. It occurred early in the school year, and teachers had little time to prepare their students for the broadcast. Some of the students were visibly upset at the graphic descriptions of mistreatment of Aboriginal people in the past, particularly the retelling of the brutal manner in which one young Aboriginal child was taken forcibly from her mother (Rudd, 2008, p. 1).

In the class discussion following the Sorry Statement, the teacher attempted to outline to the class what is meant by the term "The Stolen Generation", and the significance of the Prime Minister's apology to the nation. Her goal was to raise awareness that this occurred and that it is part of our country's history. She acknowledged the need for reconciliation, to move forward as one nation (Rudd, 2008). Some comments and questions from the students during the discussion included:

"It was really very sad!"

"Why did this happen?"

"I didn't know about this."

"It is very bad to take kids from their families."

Year Two students (personal communication 13 February 2008).

The Indigenous children's picture books that were used in the action learning project were significant in relation to the Aboriginal Education Policy, and the Adelaide Declaration.

A key element of the Policy (New South Wales Department of School Education, 1996, p. 2) is “to promote the educational achievements of Aboriginal students and to enhance the knowledge and understandings of all students about Aboriginal Australia”. The Adelaide Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999) talks about the importance of schools being socially just, and free from negative forms of discrimination. It states “All students need to understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to and benefit from reconciliation between indigenous and non indigenous Australians”(Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999, p. 3.4). Both documents stress the value of diversity in Australian society, reinforced in culturally inclusive schooling. This is evidenced by schools and teaching that values individual differences. This was an intended aim that underpinned the project, because the selected texts describe Aboriginal culture and history from an Indigenous perspective.

The macro Australian context consisted of the mandatory Aboriginal Education Policy (New South Wales Department of School Education, 1996) and the Adelaide Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999) that needed to be addressed . The micro school context was the students’ reaction to the Prime Minister’s Sorry statement and the evident need to deepen understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues within the school community. These triggers established the need for the action learning project, making it important, topical and timely at the local school and national level.

As well as these initial catalysts for action learning, a professional learning opportunity was offered to me to attend the Summer School for Teachers of English at Deakin University, Victoria in January 2008. The literature I found most engaging was a series of Indigenous children's picture books written by Indigenous authors who described growing up in Australia in diverse settings from an Aboriginal perspective.

The Indigenous children's picture books used varied in content, but common themes across the texts deepened my own knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues. The texts studied in the project were:

- When I Was Little like You (Malbunka, 2003)
- A is for Aunty (Russell, 2000)
- Father Sky and Mother Earth (Walker, 1985)
- Tracker Tjuginji (Randall & McInerney, 2003)
- Down The Hole (Williams, E, & K, 2000)
- Creatures of the Rainforest (Brim & A, 2005)
- You and Me- Our Place (Norrington & Huxley, 2007)

The voices and characters in the texts I refer to as "authentic voice", meaning the books are written by Aboriginal people about their unique history and culture. The voices in the text were used by teachers as mirrors. Students were encouraged to examine and reflect on events in the stories from an Aboriginal perspective, and react to these events using their own voices.

The texts acted as models for authentic voice, and students used them to articulate their understanding of Aboriginal culture and history.

The texts were used as a catalyst for reflection in, on and for further action. By using student voice to determine views and perceptions of the texts studied, teachers were assisting students to make sense of their world (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003).

Common Themes

A common theme in a number of the picture books studied in classrooms was the complexity of Aboriginal life prior to white invasion, and how the existing Indigenous culture was not acknowledged. A number of the texts describe how Aboriginal people were dominated by whites on the missions, and how they struggled to keep traditional culture alive for future generations. Children hunting for bush tucker, yabbying, collecting bush honey, and learning about bush medicines combined childhood play with formal education by elders. The importance of storytelling in the education of children was a focus of most of the stories. “At night time, we used to sit around the fire and listen to the old people as they told us stories. That was how the old people taught us about country” (Malbunka 2000). The concepts of whiteness, ownership, cultural diversity, colonisation and the importance Aboriginal people place on connecting with their land or country were all themes present in the texts studied, and were told using authentic voice by characters in the stories. These were the central issues discussed in- depth with the students when treating these texts throughout the project.

Many Indigenous texts used in schools are retold by non- Indigenous authors. With the best of intentions, due to innate cultural differences, intended messages are often misconstrued.

Phillips in Heiss states “white authors would need to be very enculturated with Indigenous culture and if they are not, they are writing as outsiders to that culture and their representation would be vastly different to the representation defined, developed and refined by an Indigenous author” (Heiss, 2007, p. 2). Bropho in Heiss reinforces this view. He states when a non Indigenous author hears a story in “often broken English- he hears the words, twists them around and puts the flavour of his white mind into those lines”(Heiss, 2007, p. 3). Heiss stresses the importance of ownership of the Aboriginal experience, and the possibility of misrepresentation when authentic Indigenous voice is not used in texts that describe the Aboriginal experience.

First Cycle of the Action Learning Project

Getting started with the project involved collaboratively planning a project that met the needs of the school. Six teachers from Kindergarten to Year Three volunteered to be involved, and they offered a range of reasons why they did so. Common responses related to learning more about authentic Indigenous literature, and to increasing their expertise in using multimodal literacy practices. The most common response related to their acknowledgement of the importance of Aboriginal education for all students.

At the initial planning meeting, each teacher selected a buddy teacher, and in pairs they chose a text to focus on in their class literacy programs. Teachers also decided on a multimodal literacy tool they would use with their students to demonstrate understanding in relation to the themes contained in the text studied.

In this way technology was used by students to demonstrate deep knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues treated in the texts.

Multimodal literacy practices are those practices that “demonstrate higher order literacy skills through the configuration of talking and writing with a range of other representational and communicational modes, such as gesture, gaze, movement and posture” (Bourne & Jewitt, 2003, p. 65). Aboriginal stories are based on the cultural tradition of oral storytelling. Through multimodal literacy practices, students used their own voices to creatively respond to a range of Indigenous children’s picture books. They used technology to create multimodal texts that demonstrated their understanding of themes they studied in the books. Using technology to creatively respond to and make cultural connections with and between texts is well suited to the genre.

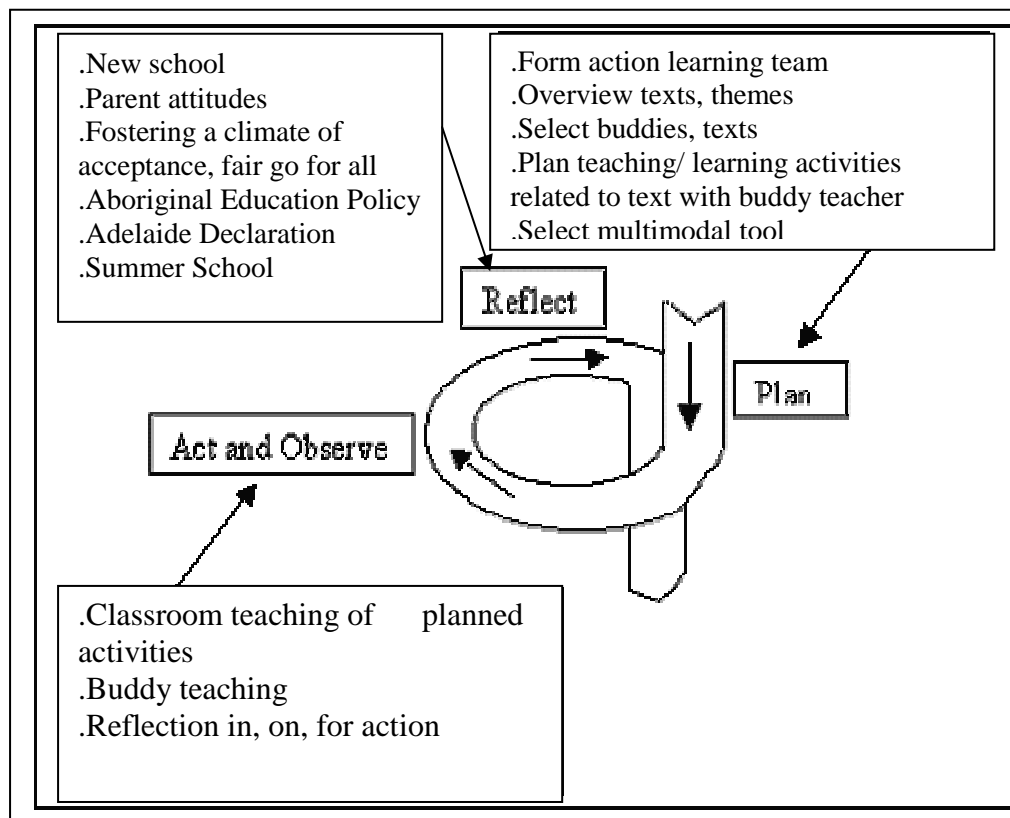


Figure 2: First cycle of Action Research Cycle

Reflection on Initial Action

Teachers planned their lessons in relation to texts chosen with their buddy teachers and implemented their learning plans in their classrooms. Mid way through the term the team met to reflect on and revise their initial plan, share their progress and collaboratively solve emerging technology issues.

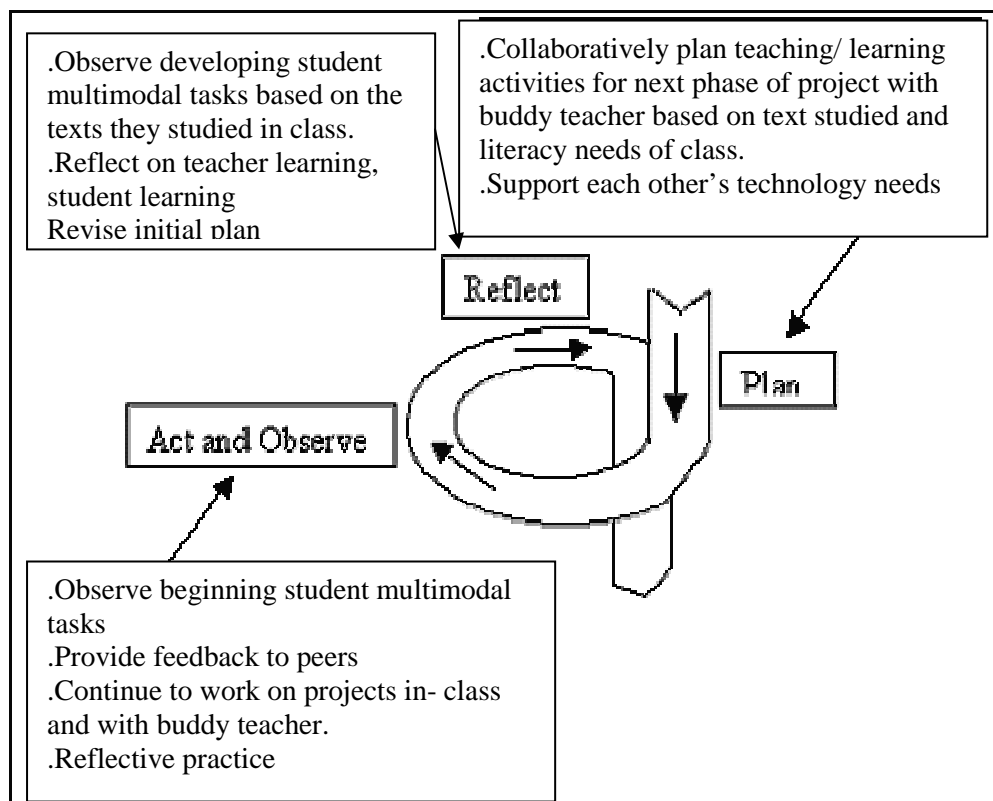


Figure 3: Second cycle of Action Research Cycle

This phase represented the beginning of the second cycle of the action research model, in which teachers observed student projects and provided initial feedback to each other, collaborated, reflected on their professional learning and their students' learning, and planned for the next stage of the project.

In one classroom, mid project, a parent helper was present when the class were introduced to the text “Down the Hole” (Williams et al., 2000). This text describes how Aboriginal parents used to hide their lighter skinned children in mineshafts whenever government officials were around, to prevent them from being taken. Following the lesson, the parent helper volunteered the following project feedback :

“I was pleased you introduced this important topic to the class through that storybook today. My dad was a teacher out west and I lived in many Aboriginal towns in my childhood. I was not told about the stolen generation as a child, and I am pleased you are sharing these stories in your class, that inform children about our history from an Aboriginal perspective. I want my child to be accurately informed about Australian history, and particularly Aboriginal Australian history”.

Parent helper (personal communication 11 June 2008).

At the end of term, the action learning team met to celebrate their learning with the wider school community and view their students’ completed multimodal projects. A representative from the school Parents and Citizens Association provided the following project feedback at the Celebration of Learning, in the third action learning cycle, where student multimodal projects were presented to the school:

“I learned more about Aboriginal history and culture in one afternoon than all the time I was at school. The issues raised in the books, and the multimodal texts created by the children were really important. I was impressed by the quality of the learning that was taking place.”

Parents and Citizens Club representative (personal communication 3 July 2008).

This parent awareness raising was an intended project outcome, suggesting some parents' knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and issues may have deepened as a result of the action learning project.

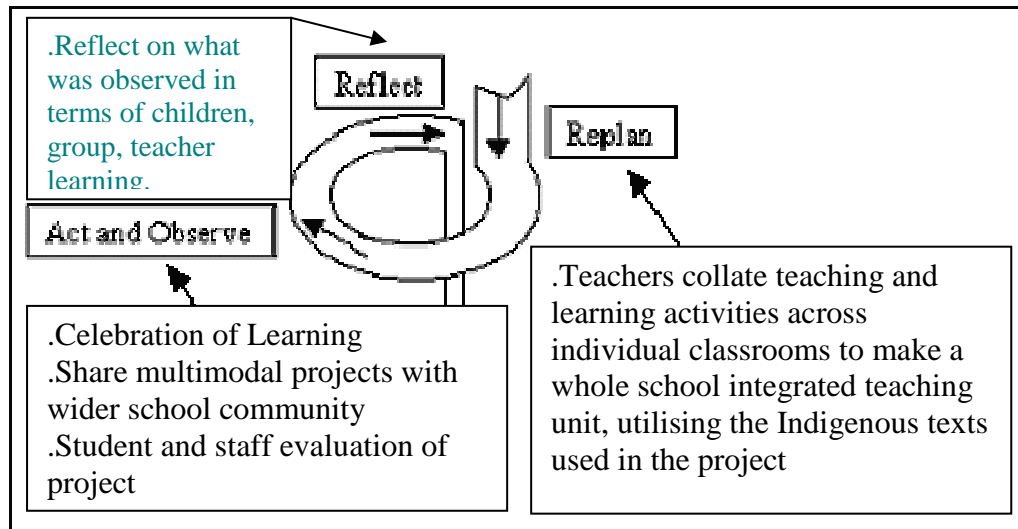


Figure 3: Third cycle of Action Learning Project

Project Evaluation

Teacher Learning

A staff survey was used to evaluate the project. All six members of the action learning team were surveyed in relation to their perceptions of the success of the action learning project. They were surveyed in relation to:

- What they learned from the project
- Whether their participation changed their pedagogy
- Their views on action learning as a model for professional learning
- Comments about the project generally

In terms of what they had learned, teachers expressed surprise at the level of students technical expertise evidenced by the quality of their multimodal projects, and the level of student interest and engagement throughout the action learning project.

A number of staff commented about their increased knowledge in relation to the stolen generation, and their increased confidence in accurately sharing this knowledge with their students as a result.

In terms of changing practice, teachers identified the increased awareness of the importance of teacher and student reflection (both teachers and students reflecting on their learning). This was reinforced by the collaborative and reflective learning model used. Teachers identified the importance of time to talk (for both teachers and students) and engage in sustained conversations until knowledge and understanding is deep.

Student Learning

Students presented multimodal texts at a celebration of learning that demonstrated their learning throughout the project. They created a range of multimodal texts based on the Indigenous children's picture books they studied. Some of the student multimodal projects included:

- A video interview of students explaining the Stolen Generation in an historical context.
- An oral information report about Aboriginal art used in a text depicting creatures of the Queensland rainforests.
- A movie depicting the importance of country, that led to the establishment of an Aboriginal garden in the school.
- A retelling of narrative using multimedia tools.

Teachers and students reported they enjoyed being part of the project because they felt the learning was significant. Students were proud of their multimodal projects and eager to share them with the wider school community, reinforcing the importance of Aboriginal education for all students. By raising awareness of the Aboriginal experience in Australia's history- greater awareness and shared understandings result.

The project is an example of action learning and technology combining to provide a means for teachers and students to use authentic voice in Indigenous children's picture books to deepen their knowledge about Aboriginal culture and history. Student voice was used to demonstrate the learning that took place in the form of student produced multimodal literacy projects. Through sharing, mutual support and reflection, teachers sought to improve their practice, at the same time deepening their professional knowledge and their students' knowledge in relation Aboriginal culture and history. The project contributed to significant learning and contextual change.

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