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Title: The Ebb and Flow of Classroom Literacy

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Abstract:

This interactive session explores how teachers might bring together practices and contexts involved in literacy in coherent, effective and engaging classroom programs. This paper examines the importance of articulating underlying beliefs and values about literacy, how it is learned and how it might be best taught. The ebb and flow of classroom life is discussed in the context of classroom organization and instructional cycles that allow for focus on goals at hand while accommodating children's own experiences as key resources for classroom learning. Based on a Social Model of Reading and Writing (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbill, 2001, 2003), this presentation will discuss a range of actual classroom examples from middle and upper Primary years, to demonstrate and exemplify effective classroom practices. These practices will be further discussed and workshopped as classroom activities, along with guiding principles for teachers to explore in their own classrooms.

The Ebb and Flow of Classroom Literacy

- Phil Fitzsimmons

Introduction: A face off

In the book *Writing in the Primary School Years* my co-authors (and co-presenters) and I inserted a belief that by the end of the primary stages children need to take more and more responsibility for their learning. As well we made the claim that teachers “must acknowledged and validate the many different ways of writing and valuing texts through inclusive instruction (and indeed all instruction” (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons and Turbill 2003:58). For us this is a key aspect of the ideology that underpins this text, the ‘Social Model of Literacy’. But what does inclusive instruction actually entail?

Thus this paper will attempt to deal with this ‘hair trigger’ issue of teaching literacy. While there is a primary aim to further elaborate on the Social Model of Literacy and where this ‘fits’ within that model (and as described and discussed by my two colleagues in this symposium), I want to also begin to ‘kite-fly’ a dialogue concerning what I consider to be a natural extension of the ideals underpinning this literacy focus of ‘inclusion and validation’. These secondary, but no less important issues centre around a pyramid of key concepts, the foundational elements of which are the view of classroom interaction and the associated ideal of teaching literacy through the use of real life texts and the ways we do this in the classroom.

At key points in this paper (and in fact starting immediately) I am going to ask you to skip to the end of my discussion and reflect on classroom transcripts and programs (entitled Focus 1 and Focus 2) to see if you can distinguish any features that I have been highlighting in the course of this deliberation.

Reflection Task 1: Using the reflective activities below, how have the teachers tried to develop the ideal of inclusion in their classes?

Do We Balk at Talk?

What constitutes the nature of classroom talk, or rather what should constitute classroom interaction has been debated and idealised in the research literature for over five decades. However, I believe has not been fully realised or appreciated by the teaching fraternity of any kind or at any level be it pre-school or tertiary teachers (perhaps I have been too harsh on the former). Research has suggested that classrooms tend to focus on the formal aspects of talk rather than developing the relational (Wertsch 1991). In other words, while the former is important, the latter allows for greater diversity of demonstrations albeit from the children in the class.

This is not through any fault of theirs, but is a result of the bureaucratic nature of the education systems that have evolved through the last century and as evidenced in more recent times in the United Kingdom (Simon 1992). Having now said this, it's more than likely I have turned you, the reader, completely off as I tend to think we as educators talk a great deal about the importance of talk in the context of advancing oracy, literacy and critical literacy in children, or at least the concept of what constitutes genuine classroom talk. However I do not think we always walk the talk. And when it comes to talking about talking we all believe we do it right and we get uptight when we are told that we are not doing it the proper way and immediately move into a mode that I consider we should all do in the classroom; we argue (Tannen 1999). But I will return to this later.

Probably many of us do 'talk' quite well, but I suspect many of us don't do it as well as we think. And so a secondary aim of this paper is to ask you to 'please consider'. If you refute what I have to say and want to argue, that's good. If you consider what I have written has a modicum of truth and turn your classrooms,

what ever and wherever they may be, into places of even more focussed discussion even better. But for now, please read on and argue with yourself.

As stated in the opening paragraph, the key element of this paper is the notion of teacher talk. This precept tends to be linked to the premise that optimal teacher talk in the classroom, and in the teaching of literacy is somehow manifested as 'collaborative learning'. While researchers espouse the virtues of genuine collaborative learning and the necessity of teachers creating and crafting genuine interactive dialogue, research at the coalface, or should I say chalkface, suggests that overall genuine talk between teachers and their charges in the classroom, the type of interaction that occurs naturally in the playground, the home and in the day to day course of each others lives, is 'actively discouraged and treated as disruptive and subversive" (Mercer 1995:89). Here is the first dilemma faced by teachers, while the everyday life is underpinned by an ebb and flow of highly charged banter, jointly negotiated interaction and the reconstruction of contrasting views, the classroom is not!

Despite differences in depth of ability, appreciation of contexts of situation and variables such as personality, nearly all children come to school with an accumulation of 'funds of knowledge' (Moll and Gonzalez 1994 cited Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons and Turbill 2003), and more importantly an initial desire to engage with the teachers and writing. However something happens along the way. Cameron (1998) believes that this natural bent to want to talk and write, drawing from personal experience actually becomes subsumed at a later stage in school because of the forces to conform to correctness. This is not a bad thing per se, but rather Cameron believes it becomes an overriding force of an 'academic paradigm of self doubt and self scrutiny' (1998:2,3). Tough words! In other words the elements of the Social Model, 'the cultural and social capital' become background voices rather than pivotal foci.

If indeed 'literacy floats on a sea of talk' (Briton 1972) then it would appear that a basic ingredient is missing from the mix. If children are accustomed to constant negotiation such as defining personal boundaries and reclaiming their person and possessions as a matter of everyday interaction, then what I am suggesting is that the classroom language and literacy experience could lack a dimension of natural spontaneity and discursiveness. While the classroom can never represent the world outside its walls, decentring classroom interaction, or following a thread but allowing for tangents and these, has been demonstrated to be a key facet in providing children with alternate views and these of themselves, the world around them ditto and develop greater language skills. Explicit instruction laced with guided roundabout interaction especially these, has been also demonstrated to produce a shift in children's understanding of cooperation which Strauss and Shilony (1994) believe serves to also aid and develop a teacher's scaffolding and development of understanding new concepts.

However, the notion of children taking a leading or parallel role in classroom discussion would appear to be in conflict with current systemic trends in education. To use a more appropriate metaphor, this actual classroom implementation of this ideal is on a knife edge as many of the literacy interactions and interfaces between teacher and pupils are resting on very subtle forms of 'teacher engineering' (Strauss and Shilony 1994).

Reflection Task 2: Using the reflective activity 1 below, what is the form of 'teacher engineering' employed by the teacher?

While teachers have been found to be aware of the need to engender debate and discussion it has been found that their personal ideologies tend to be undermined by the systems they work in (Hand and Teagust 1994). Or is that more dumped on than undermined? In Australasia, the trends in other First World countries such as the USA and Great Britain are being realised as policy

pushes towards greater accountability in regard to teacher registration, tighter supervisory practices, teaching episodes (especially literacy blocks) and could have the potential to follow a similar path to what Bruer (1993) describes as an 'algorithmic approach', one that leaves little room for children to meander in thought or discussion. David Bleich is a little more forthright stating that these conditions do not reflect the established research or teachers perceptions, and actually reflect western systems that whether by design or accident produce in the classroom "repression and compliance. while not military in intention and urgency resembles the military in structure and behaviour" (Bleich 1998:148). While this may raise the hackles of teachers and administrators, children in our classrooms may be at the wrong end of the systemic food chain, caught at the end of a system in which they and their teachers are trapped in a web focussed on teaching instead of 'expending their main efforts on inquiry, discourse and cooperative learning" (Shachar and Sharon 1994:350)

While possessing genuine concerns with off task talk and directions the talk may take, teaches in our system may be in danger of forcing children to work in a language-thinking vein which instead of use a 'feedback loop' (Argyris and Schon 1978) of circuitous talk to develop further concepts begin to operate in a highly technical manner.

Reflection Task 3: Using the transcript of the maths lesson at the conclusion of this paper, find elements that indicate the teacher is trying to use a meandering approach. What is the nature of these elements?

This leads to the second pivotal point and follows up the ideal that literacy 'floats on a sea of talk' (Briton 1972). If the talk needs to be both focused and yet allowing for flexibility then it follows that the explicit reading-writing teaching episodes need to follow the same pattern. That is when demonstrating key issues, strategies or approaches in regard to reading and writing, teachers need

to actively look for times of ‘contingency’ (Geekie, Cambourne and Fitzsimmons 1999). These are times embedded in or immediately following explicit instruction given over to the students’ questions, follow up and thoughts.

Bleich (1998:142) believes this should follow a pattern of “disclosure, genre and membership”. Essentially this episodic triptych revolves around the need for a teacher to provide clear and explicit instruction using a variety of genres as demonstrations but these elements should be sufficiently powerful to create an impetus of further investigation and elaboration by the students. Bleich further suggests that this elaboration is based on a contingent curriculum base whose source is the student’s interests, knowledge, understanding and experience; genuine cooperative learning; free expression of opinions “integrating social relations with the study of language and language use” (Bleich 1998:152).

Now I want to briefly return to an element of natural language use that I promised I would return to, and begin to pull the threads of this paper together. Costanzo (2004) believes that is the visual and interactive media that have become the literature for today’s children and these elements are simply absorbed into their lives. Interestingly, without defining what these are, he further states that teachers might be surprised at what the children actually glean from these non-print texts.

And so now I am going to ask you take up personal responsibility and take into account the ideals expressed in this paper. To do I ask that you undertake the following reflective activities.

Reflection Task 4: Using the transcript of the maths lesson below, find elements that indicate the teacher is trying to use a meandering approach. What is the nature of these elements?

Reflection Task 5

- Find elements discussed in the paper that are embedded in this program?
- Find elements of the 'Social Model'
- What might you expect to happen in regard to teaching contingently?
- What were the 'funds of knowledge' this teacher was trying to activate?
- What contingent questions might you have to prepare?

Focus 1

TRANSCRIPT - Dick –

Context: Year 10 Maths Class. This class is considered to be unable to cope with even the most basic concepts of the maths curriculum.

Dick: (Addressing me after introduction) We also realise that this class background is a little behind and that they have come from different classes and we are a bit behind and I said that while we have been doing algebra recently but I would start off with some geometry this morning and a part of what I have to do is to learn or to recognise the skills of the people and where they are up to and I expect quite a few diverse answers this morning.

Dick: I'm just going to draw one figure, I'll put a name to it and I want you to write down three or four things that get prompted by what I have drawn on the board. Now you just use your imagination as to what we might write down.

Dick: Okay here is the figure. These are the words to go with it. Now can you write down three or four things that you recognise have something to do with that figure or is it something to do with that word. I don't necessarily want you to draw anything but if you do that is up to you.

Dick: What is your response to seeing that diagram and/or that word and remember we are drawing on different backgrounds and different experiences you have had. Anything at all that you can write down as a result of that.

Dick: I'll just write a few down and that might just give you a couple of hints if you are a bit of a slow self-starter. Luke you have written something down, what did you write down?

Dick: Come on you tell me one thing. Take a risk, I won't go crook if you are wrong.

Dick: Would anybody like to add anything else? Have you anything to suggest Aaron?

Dick: What are some of the things you would be looking for if you were looking at a square. What would be some of the characteristics of a square? What makes that four sided figure a square?

Dick: Can I try and bring something new into this -FOLDING. Can you write down something please in response to this word as far as that shape is concerned? Picture a square. Something about folding, what is your response to that? What could I do for example? Why do you say triangles, tell me what I have got to do to make triangles?

Focus 2

Program: Shared Reading of Tully Finding the Hero

- **Context: This is an actual program used by a teacher who was aiming to use the precepts of the 'Social Model of Literacy'**

Aim: To find a personal definition of a hero	Developmental Foci	In the classroom I will:
Tolly's Developing Character	<p>1. Discuss Tolly's heroic actions through discovery of "<i>...coincidences and circumstances, which almost force the hero into action</i>" www.geocities.com</p> <p>- Focus on death of his mother and the remarriage of his father; the coincidence is that of a letter from his Grandmother requesting he come live with her.</p>	<p>- focus student attention on newspaper articles relating to the term hero, compare and contrast these to develop a composite definition.</p> <p>- make links to the Hero through reading of chapter 1 of <i>Children of the Green Knowe</i>.</p> <p>- compare with newspaper definition</p> <p>- discuss Tolly's reactions to his circumstances</p> <p>- children write letter from grandmother and as speech bubbles insert Tolly's thoughts</p>
	<p>2. The ideal of growing realisation, Tolly's train trip to his grandmothers</p>	<p>- create posters of students interpretation of what Tolly might be thinking, express through colour and textures used) Discuss, compare and contrast</p> <p>TS3.1 ...expresses well-developed, well organised ideas dealing with more challenging topics. K-6 Syllabus</p>

	<p>Tolly is looking out at the rain “..splashing against the windows and blotching down in an ugly, dirty way.” <i>Rain is spiritual fertility, light and spiritual influences</i>” Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1996. p 782 Upon arriving at his Grandmothers castle Tolly is surrounded by spirits who influence him into being the happy child he has not been since his mother died and his father left him</p>	<p>With parental permission use video <i>The Never Ending Story</i>. Develop student vocabulary to assist them in the following activity... On a proforma have students list and discuss aspects of the movie in relation to the Hero, The Call, The Quest, The Mentors, Obstacles, Fulfilment of the Quest, Return of the Hero, in what way was he transformed? RS3.7 Critically analyses techniques used by writers to create certain effects... English K-6 Syllabus</p> <p>Have students create a flowchart to show what has happened to Tolly so far in the book and what they predict might happen next. WS3.11 Spells most common words accurately and uses a range of strategies to spell unfamiliar words. English K-6 Syllabus</p>
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