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Mapping literacy practices

One of the strengths of the “four resources model” is that it attempts to recognise and incorporate many of the current and well-developed techniques for training students in becoming literate. It shifts the focus from trying to find the right method to whether the range of practices emphasised in one’s reading program are indeed covering and integrating a broad repertoire of textual practices that are required in new economies and cultures. The model, then, is a map of possible practices (Luke and Freebody, 1999)

During the last two years I have been working with teachers to turn these words of Allan Luke’s and Peter Freebody’s into reality. The question that has driven my work is, how can the four resources model be used as a ‘map of possible practices’? I have found that the teachers I have worked with have not only benefited from this mapping exercise, but they have genuinely been excited and enthused about using the model for planning literacy practices in their classrooms. In this article, I will share some of the general principles and practices that inform this work.

Teachers as bricoleurs

All of my research and teaching is informed by my understanding of teachers as *bricoleurs* (Honan, 2001). This is a French term, drawn from the work of anthropologist Levi-Strauss and used by French philosophers, Derrida and de Certeau. A *bricoleur* is someone who draws on a variety of resources around them to create a meaningful assemblage of practices. For teachers, these resources may include curriculum documents, teachers’ reference books, inservice and professional development sessions, preservice education experiences, conversations with other teachers, and memories of their own school experiences. Drawing on this diverse range of resources allows teachers to create a *bricolage* of practice that makes specific and particular sense for each group of students with which they work.

Understanding teachers as *bricoleurs* and their work as *bricolage* helps me to make sense of some of the questions and dilemmas that continually arise in the education sector. Most

importantly this contributes to a recognition of teachers as professionals who will not blindly follow mandated curriculum or departmental directives, and who will not be transformed into technical bureaucrats who teach using prepackaged sets of materials sold to them in professional development sessions. The teacher as *bricoleur* is one who carefully and thoughtfully makes a series of professional judgements about *what* and *how* to teach.

Why do we do the things we do?

The bricoleur is also someone who makes connections between theories and practices. I do not believe teachers are atheoretical and only interested in practical strategies. Rather I believe, and this has been confirmed by my work with teachers, that if teachers are given the time and space to think reflexively about the question, why do I do the things I do?, in their answers they will always draw on their beliefs, or theories, about how children learn, about what is the best way to teach, and about language and literacy.

Teachers as researchers

Teachers who are professional bricoleurs who make connections between theories and practices are interested in researching their own and others' work, rather than being the recipients of professional development or the 'subjects' of academic research projects. Once again time and reflexive space are crucial to the development of 'critical teacher research' (Kincheloe, 2003). Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2004/forthcoming) have described one of the key points that distinguishes teacher research from that led by academics as "that teacher research must flow from the *authentic* or felt questions, issues and concerns of *teachers themselves*". Most importantly they see this point as being compatible with guidance and formal suggestions offered by academics. It is how the relationships are formed and conducted between members of the research team that identifies the work as teacher research.

Researching literacy teaching practices

These principles, understanding teachers as bricoleurs who make connections between theories and practice and act as co-researchers in research projects, inform the framework for research that uses Freebody and Luke's four resources model to map teachers' literacy teaching practices.

The research is organised around the release of teachers from their classrooms. It is imperative that teachers be given the time and space to do this kind of research, and I therefore will not agree to work with teachers after school or on weekends. In the initial meeting with teachers I provide them with readings on the four resources model and on critical teacher research. These readings then

become the focus of the second session where we develop a shared understanding of the four resources model and on the framework for the project.

The third session begins with a discussion centred on the question, ‘why do we do the things we do?’ with time allocated for written reflections. Teachers then spend time in their own classrooms collecting data on their current literacy teaching practices. The teachers decide how and what they are going to collect. For example, some have used planning documents, student worksheets and/or information they had collected for ongoing assessment of student work, while others made notes about their teaching practices while they were actually engaged in teaching. The next stage of the research process is to map the strategies that the teachers currently use, collected in the data collection phase, onto the four resources framework. The teachers and I work together to decide which of the four resources was being encouraged by each particular teaching strategy they described as being used in their classrooms.

In one particular project, this mapping exercise provided us with some valuable insights into the teachers’ practices (Honan, 2003). First, the emphasis on code breaking in their current teaching was quickly recognised by the teachers. They drew each others attention to the growing list of practices under the *breaking the code* heading, while at the same time noting that they had not been previously aware of this emphasis. So the mapping exercise shed new light on the teachers’ existing practices.

Second, the teachers were aware that the practices listed under the *participate in the meaning* heading grew out of work they had previously done using a language experience approach. So the mapping exercise assisted teachers to see how their theoretical beliefs about literacy informs their practices.

Third, the teachers saw that they were not encouraging students to *critically analyse and transform texts*. Making visible this gap helped teachers to think critically themselves about their own practices. So the mapping exercise not only helped the teachers see their practices in new ways but also helped them to identify where they might strengthen their work. This then is much more than just a reaffirmation of teachers’ work – the mapping exercise provided the teachers with the impetus needed to create and transform new practices.

In the next stage of the research, teachers search and plan for new practices that will ‘fill the gaps’

This search for new practices depends heavily on teachers' existing professional knowledge. From these discussions and searches, the teachers devise practices to be trialled in their classrooms.

After the trialling of new strategies the research team meets to discuss the problems and successes experienced in the classroom and to begin the task of creating a list of strategies that could be used to encourage students' development of all four of the literacy resources. This is a long and complex task that involves many drafts.

During our last meeting together I ask the teachers to reflect, in both written and oral forms, on their experiences during the project. I ask them to consider not only the content of the project, that is the investigation of their current literacy teaching practices and the use of the four resources model as a mapping tool, but also the process of the project, including issues related to time, organisation, number of participants etc.

So far, teachers' comments about both the content and process have been encouraging, enthusiastic and critically reflective. Generally there are two aspects of the project that always generate positive comments. The first is the value of the four resources model as a framework that recognises teachers' existing work in literacy teaching, and the second is the recognition of the professionalism of teaching through the construction of teachers as bricoleurs.

In this paper I have explained some of the principles that inform the work I do with teachers who are interested in exploring their literacy teaching practices. I believe this kind of work can lead to improved literacy outcomes for all of our students, as well as improving the collegial relationships between teachers and academics in education faculties.

References

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