Exemplary Literacy Pedagogies

Literacy education is permanently fluid. Technology is constantly changing the definition of literacy. Printed books and hand-written words are sharing class time with communication technologies and virtual worlds. The mouse is now as mighty as the pen. In this setting, the core skills of reading and writing are no longer enough. Children need to communicate across cultures and social groups to engage successfully in an ever-advancing world. The teacher’s kitbag must also change if literacy is to remain educationally-important. Applying exemplary literacy pedagogies becomes the obligation of all educators. The task begins with recognising that literacy is multi-dimensional. It then scrutinises the traditional pedagogies to identify where each approach remains relevant, and crafts a plan for its enactment in the culturally and linguistically diverse primary school classroom. This flexible, holistic and student-centred approach is the type of exemplary model that will keep literacy education relevant for a new generation of students.

Modern literacy education is underpinned by the desire to develop multi-literate students. If it is education’s task to help children become fully-integrated and active contributors to the social and professional worlds in which they mix, then the multiple literacies of communication sit at the core of that responsibility (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 52). Literacy therefore includes the complex demands of multi-modality. In the student-centric classroom, for example, children explore, share and experiment with ways to interpret and represent the various modes including images, gestures, photographs, videos and sounds (Walsh, 2010, p. 211). Further, students are expected to switch between the different modes with synaesthetic fluidity (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 195), while conversing, coercing, negotiating, engaging and connecting. To this end the classroom becomes a centre for “grand conversations” (Tompkins, Campbell, Green & Smith, 2015, p. 401), debates, role-plays, poetry and speeches. Further, there is the need for technological literacy. If a website is the literacy equal of a book (Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009, p. 266), then instruction about search engines becomes the literacy teacher’s domain (Casteck, Bevans-Mangelson & Goldstone, 2006, p. 726). A multi-literacies approach blends digital and multi-modal forms of communication with the finest elements of the traditional pedagogies (Mills, 2010, p. 136) for greatest effect.
The first approach to literacy instruction is *didactic*. It is accredited to the 16th century French academic Petrus Ramus (Reid & Wilson, 2011, p. 8). It was pedagogy for its time. Didactic pedagogy emphasises the need for children to know and apply the rules and conventions of language (Tompkins, Campbell, Green, & Smith, 2015, p. 208). In a didactic classroom, phonics and grammar are the basis for teaching reading and writing. Teachers disseminate language facts for the children to memorise through repetition (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 86), and printed texts are beyond challenge. Didactic pedagogy has its detractors. Firstly, it is an approach more suited to the industrial era when employers wanted subordinate workers who would follow instructions without dissent (Graff, 1987, p. 262). Secondly, direct instruction is disengaging for children (Gee, 2004, p. 11) and can therefore “disempower” students (Jongsman, 1991, p. 519). Finally, the complicated rules and conventions of English are frequently too difficult for children to learn (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 209). Notwithstanding this, didactic pedagogy still has a role to play in the modern classroom. For example, explicit instruction in spelling, grammar and punctuation is arguably efficient (Walsh, 2010, p. 227). This is because committing rules and conventions to memory can help children’s literacy development (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 368). Take, for instance, the case of phonics. Children can often decode unfamiliar words when they know the phonics rules (Armbruster, Lehr, Osborn & Adler, 2001, p. 14). Further, phonics instruction helps students with reading and learning difficulties (Cohen & Cowan, 2011, p. 439). When didactic pedagogy supports learning in this way, its place in the classroom is validated.

The next literacy pedagogy is *authentic*. This was John Dewey’s response to the need for students to engage in more practical literacy experiences (Dewey, 1915, p. 3). It deliberately differentiates itself from the didactic approach. Firstly, students become important contributors to their knowledge rather than teachers imposing knowledge on the children (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 103). Secondly, literacy becomes more meaningful and motivating by focusing on children’s interests (Cohen & Cowan, 2011, p. 446). In process writing, for instance, children select their own topic to explore and write about (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 108). The teacher provides scaffolding that guides the children through the process of successful writing, and relates the task to ‘real-world’ writing. Thirdly, this approach empowers the children to develop their own meanings as writers, readers and creators (Hill,
2006, p. 139). For example, different interpretations of the same book are valued and peer feedback is encouraged. Writing for an authentic audience in this way adds meaning to the task, further increasing motivation (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall & Tower, 2006, p. 352). Fourthly, teachers can facilitate dynamic discussions around interesting topics, leading to authentic reading and writing activities to provoke higher order thinking and deeper understandings (Van de Weghe, 2008, p. 108). Authentic pedagogy makes literacy relevant and meaningful, and so should be a regular feature in the classroom.

*Functional* literacy is the next approach. It is predicated on Michael Halliday’s view that literacy education should focus on purposes and genres of texts (Hasan, 2014, p. 1). In functional literacy, children identify the purposes of texts, and then examine how texts are structured to achieve those objectives. For example, restaurant menus, warning signs and instructions are all organised according to their purposes, and so functional literacy brings children to an understanding of intentions and audience (Walsh, 2010, p. 215). Significantly, when children understand that texts can carry motives (McLaren, 1988, p. 218), they are empowered to make more informed choices (Castek, Bevans-Mangelson & Goldstone, 2006, p. 726). This is especially important for minority groups who can often be disconnected from the languages of power (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 131). This imbalance is further addressed when children have the skills to construct writing in numerous genres for their social and professional advancement (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 129). For example, children learn how to create a factual report complete with its objectivity and authoritative tone. Comprehending and replicating such writing grants children access to levels of society from which they might otherwise have been excluded (McLaren, 1988, p. 214). This sets children on the path to becoming “fully literate” citizens (Castek, Bevans-Mangelson & Goldstone, 2006, p. 727) who can effectively communicate across genres. The empowering nature of functional literacy makes it well-suited to today’s classrooms.

The fourth pedagogy is *critical* literacy. Paulo Freire’s approach gives children agency (Roberts, 2000, p. 53). It engages students through literacies they find relevant and interesting, and empowers the children to tackle issues that are significant to them (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 164). This pedagogy develops children’s critical thinking skills as they question, explore, and express. Where
didactic literacy places the text as an indisputable authority, in critical literacy children challenge and question the text, and the author’s motives (Jongsma, 1991, p. 518). For example, children might review multiple texts about Australia’s Indigenous history and note how some events are recorded differently depending on the author. Children then explore those differences to more deeply understand social challenges (Labadie, Wetzel & Rogers, 2012, p. 118). In this way, children become change agents (Mills, 2010, p. 125), interrogating the previously irreproachable, and taking steps towards a more just society (Jongsma, 1991, p. 518). This upsetting of traditional power bases (Luke, 2012, p. 9) makes literacy a force for equality. This approach also requires that children recognise they create and interpret texts from their own perspectives, and how these views differ from person to person (Kalantzis, 2006, p. 11). Its ability to develop critical awareness in children means this pedagogy satisfies a key demand of the national curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2015) and is integral in the modern classroom.

The four literacy pedagogies each contain essential components for inclusion in the modern classroom. To more accurately reflect their purpose in the classroom, however, it is suggested that each of these pedagogies be renamed: didactic becomes conceptualise; authentic becomes experience; functional becomes apply; and critical becomes analyse (Kalantzis, 2006, p. 11). While the earlier examples show how all pedagogies have roles to play in today’s classrooms, an exemplary strategy is not about the discrete selection of one approach over the others (Cohen & Cowan, 2011, p. 478). Likewise it might not be sufficient for the children’s literacy development for teachers to switch between the different pedagogies at will (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 358). A preferred approach involves the deliberate inclusion of the four pedagogies in their most educationally-valid location. This holistic integration into the classroom creates an effective, powerful and meaningful literacy experience inclusive of all students (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 369). The following example of a unit of work clearly illustrates the dynamics of this approach. A Stage 2 class is exploring the theme of sustainability. The teacher recognises the opportunity to engage in all four pedagogies throughout the unit, as a way to enrich and deepen the students’ learning. The unit begins with an excursion to a local heritage-listed building, to view and record information about sustainability first-hand. This is the experiential (authentic) component. Next, the children conduct research at
school through the National Trust website to dig deeper into the theme, and identify specific terminology and concepts. This is the conceptualising (didactic) phase. The experience and concepts are synthesised when the students, working in groups of four, prepare a factual report about the importance of protecting the built environment. This third step is the analytical (critical) phase. Finally, in the apply (functional) stage, each group produces a digital presentation, such as a Claymation or Prezi, to be shared with other schools to raise awareness of the issue. It should be noted that the sequence of the pedagogies is chosen for its appropriateness to the task. The sequence and balance might therefore vary from unit to unit (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 358). Selection and planning of each approach demands careful consideration. Teachers who choose pedagogies based on how they might best engage and stimulate the students are maximising the potential for every child to be successful (Neville, 2010, p. 237). Add to this the positive impact of relating literacy activities to the real world (Gee, 2004, p. 35) and this multi-pedagogy strategy has strong and positive impacts on children’s literacy development.

Modern literacy instruction takes place in the diverse environments of Australian classrooms. Differentiated instruction is therefore essential for student engagement and motivation (TED, 2013; Goodman, 1971, p. 24). In literacy education a varied and multi-modal approach which incorporates the numerous literacies, and caters to student interests and abilities, is most effective (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012, p. 379-380). This can be achieved by, for example, strong student-teacher relationships, varied grouping patterns, and ensuring that all students are given challenging tasks suited to their capacity (Cohen & Cowan, 2011, p. 445-6). Viewing diversity as a “rich resource” (Mills, 2010, p. 136) maximises every student’s opportunity to excel.

Literacy education is complex and multi-faceted. It is filled with pens, books, JPEGs, sound files, web pages, and the intangible communications of gesture and subtlety, to name a few. Teachers are charged with preparing students for this information and communication-rich world in which interpretation and representation must cross social and cultural boundaries. Students, with all their strengths and differences, need to access, make sense of, and contribute to the ever-shifting world around them. Exemplary literacy pedagogies provide maximum engagement and understanding as students conceptualise, experience, analyse and apply what they learn. The multi-pedagogy multi-literacy approach empowers students to unlock the
various dimensions of social, professional and academic life. The careful and dynamic blending of pedagogies, literacies and modalities means teachers have the flexibility to keep literacy education relevant for future generations.

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References


