

Lecturer as teacher. Teacher as researcher: Making theory practical

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ABSTRACT: The project described here shows how much that our understanding of literacy learning can grow when schools and universities can work together to improve students' learning. A secondary English teacher and a university lecturer team-taught a year seven class of 30 boys from working-class and multiple-language backgrounds. The project aimed to increase the effectiveness of the conventional, novel-based English curriculum with students whose cultural and linguistic resources needed to grow significantly if they were to be successful in the school system. The action research model of shared planning, teaching and reflection gave both teacher and lecturer a supportive context in which to experiment with new approaches to literacy teaching. The project found that teaching the novel can be effective but only if teaching approaches link students' own cultural resources to the school-based texts. The project also showed that the team-teaching/research model is invaluable as a way of breaking down the barriers which separate universities and schools as places of knowledge about learning and teaching.

KEYWORDS: Gender and literacy, school university partnerships, teacher education, boys and reading, secondary English teaching.

GENESIS OF A PARTNERSHIP

As a lecturer to pre-service teachers I am used to the tactless remark from students, "You learn everything about teaching in schools. What you do at university is all theory." Such a view of universities sidelines research to the realm of the esoteric, of little value to real teachers, however necessary for academics' promotion. The project described here was an attempt to link school classroom teaching and university research in a mutually valuable partnership. Annie, a teacher at a large Catholic college situated in a working class part of Melbourne, had a year seven class of 30 boys from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. She was concerned that the students' academic language resources were not strong and the curriculum based around the reading of novels was not extending them. I was an academic eager to try out some ideas I had developed during an earlier research project on teaching text (Ryan, 2001). We met when I introduced myself at an English professional development session which Annie was attending as an academic in search of an English teacher who was interested in new ways of approaching the English curriculum. We agreed to work together to teach the school's term three and four curriculum, based around novels, to see what more could be made of it. It was a loose alliance with the details of approach largely undefined but, as Sumara (Pinar in Sumara, 1996, p. 173) suggests, the practice of laying down the path while walking can lead to worthwhile places.

It was significant for the productive partnership which was to develop that both participants were keen to experiment and were tolerant of that lack of certainty which comes from breaking with established patterns of working. The school system

required an explicit research plan and informed consent from the students and their parents and this process, while time consuming, is one that forces potential researchers to clarify their goals. The research “problem”, as I stated it in the ethics application, was to make the framework of Annie’s year seven English curriculum an opportunity “to improve the way texts are taught in English ... taking as starting points the literacy needs of the students in the class and the idea that reading is an active, multi-sensory process.” Action research is an appropriate term for the model, in that while we had starting points and some immediate plans, we did not have the whole program formulated. Our idea was to try some strategies, reflect on what worked or did not work, and move in appropriate directions. In terms of formal roles, I wrote reflections after Annie and I had discussed our work together. I undertook the writing because I felt that Annie was busy enough without undertaking this task and I felt greater engagement in reflection about what our work might show about English teaching practice. Nevertheless our partnership did involve us taking a shared role in planning and teaching the class over a period of about 15 weeks, with me being in class for about half of their weekly English lessons. After each class we discussed what we had or had not achieved and made plans for moving forward. In this sense the teaching and research goals and process were closely aligned, which strengthened the partnership.

OUR SHARED GOAL: IMPROVED LITERACY FOR THESE STUDENTS

The students came from at least ten different ethnic groups: Italian, Greek, Central American being some, with the largest group being students from SE Asia. A number of these spoke a language other than English at home. Annie was aware that the parents saw the financial commitment of sending their sons to a fee-paying school (albeit a low-fee paying one) as paving the way to a successful academic future. She was also aware that if the boys did not gain greater control over school-based reading and writing, this was unlikely for most of them. The class was most obliging in terms of doing what they were asked, although their physical restlessness meant they were challenging to manage and made the stereotypical “boy” label (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998) easy to apply.

As I discovered in preliminary interviews with the students, their text preferences made them “typical” boys as discussed in recent surveys of boys’ reading (Australian Centre for Youth Literature, 2001; Manuel & Robinson, 2002; Millard, 1997). Only a handful were committed readers but they all expressed heartfelt pleasure in movies and many were enthusiastic about computers. Naming a favourite book seemed hard for many of them and, when they did, their taste was for humour and adventure. The texts prescribed by their English curriculum during the time of the project were relatively serious novels, including one set during the first Olympic Games, *Pankration* (Blacklock, 1997) and *Somewhere around the corner* (French, 1994), the latter featuring time shifts between the present and the 1930s Depression. Also prescribed by the year seven curriculum were reading circles and reading journals. Few were keen about the journals, although the chance to read with a small group of classmates did not seem unpopular.

Annie was most concerned about their writing. Jimmy was one of the most astute students in discussion, yet his written work was barely punctuated and full of spelling

errors. This sample shows his writing in the persona of a young woman about to undergo an arranged marriage:

My wedding is tommorrow [sic]. I have no choice in it. This dissapoints [sic] me. Nic [brother] is upset he makes me cry. I feel sorry for him. I just wish that he would accept the fact that I'm to be weded [sic] with Pitacus.

As she explained to me, there seemed little time to focus on the individual boy's needs when she was so busy getting through the curriculum which prescribed the study of a different text each term. I felt that my past research findings gave me ideas about just such a situation as Annie's, since hers was typical of secondary English classrooms I had studied (Ryan, 2001). Working with this class was an opportunity for me to see whether there were opportunities to do more with the traditional English curriculum and improve outcomes for at risk students such as these working class boys. The shared approach to the research "problem" seemed to offer many potential benefits for both Annie and myself.

A SCORE FOR RESEARCH

From the start, the partnership yielded results for both of us. I was able to test a recommendation made in a previous research project about teaching the "set" novel (Ryan, 2001). My findings led me to suggest to Annie that we alter the common practice in her school and many schools, of reading aloud the novel to students in class. I had found such an approach was often adopted by teachers because they believed that without it students simply would not read. I saw the practice as evidence of the low expectations that teachers can have of their students; in my project these expectations were seen more often in working-class schools such as Annie's than in schools with more middle-class students. Moreover, there is evidence that secondary teachers expect less of their early secondary students than do primary teachers and that year sevens are given less opportunity for independent reading than when they were in year six (Green, 1998).

The decision to give students a reading schedule and expect them to meet the requirement was one which "saved" Annie and me a good deal of class time. We used this "extra" time for addressing students' writing needs. At the end of the unit on *Pankration*, 18 out of 30 students said they had read "all" of the novel and 7 said they had read "most" of it. Only one student confessed to reading "some." The numbers were clearly inflated by students' reluctance to admit that they had not done the reading, yet it was also clear that many had read some on their own – a significant accomplishment in itself. We by no means had "solved" the reading issues of the class but we did feel we had achieved a minor victory. The fact that we were conducting a research project as well as teaching a unit of work encouraged us to seek evidence, such as students' opinions, about the value of the strategies we tried. These actions strengthened our teaching decisions as well as informing our reflections as researchers.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN A WORLD OF BELLS AND LUNCH DUTY

My flexible schedule made it possible to come to two or three of the group's four English classes per week. However, as research partners, Annie and I found it difficult to find time to meet to plan and reflect on our work. We had a number of sessions discussing our ideas as Annie supervised boys in the lunch room and I had a few minutes before rushing back to the campus. This is of more than trivial importance in that reflective practice demands time to discuss the meaning of classroom experience. The nature of the school teacher's work especially gives little time for reflection (Loughran, Mitchell & Mitchell, 2002). We dealt with the problem by using email to communicate when we had no time to talk in person, and each of us had to be good humoured about incidents like my arriving late to class or the sudden cancellation of classes owing to the last minute school assembly (or similar) which is a feature of school life. In fact, through such incidents, each of us came to a better understanding of each other's work, thus making our partnership more effective.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY STUDENTS AND THE NOVEL

It is said by commentators on the impact of the computer in the classroom that schools have been only cosmetically affected by the ICT revolution, that teachers are still doing "chalk and talk" and reading traditional texts when the world has moved on (Green, 2001). It was true at Annie's school that novel study was the key component of the curriculum. However, we were free to make students' responses to the novel less traditional.

Theorising about text teaching has emphasised the need to make connections between the students' most familiar ways of expressing themselves and the discourse of the classroom. For instance, Jeffrey Wilhelm's *You gotta BE the book* (1997) argues that many inexperienced and inexperienced readers of print texts need to be encouraged to imagine the story world. So he recommends drawing and drama as ways of bringing forth the world of the novel. A related idea is the recommendation that students' cultural knowledge, especially the multimedia texts with which they are most at home, must be incorporated into the classroom (Sefton-Green, 1999; Durrant & Beavis, 2001).

In fact, drawing did not work for us in the way Wilhelm talks about it, so this first "idea" was not useful. The boys liked drawing Homer Simpson look-a-likes to represent characters in the novel but this did little to intensify their experience of them. Drama was another story. For example, our novel *Pankration* (Blacklock, 1997) was set in ancient Greece and featured an arranged marriage. We asked students to role-play a modern family where a daughter was to have her marriage arranged for her. Later we asked students to perform as characters in the novel in the format of a popular day-time television show. I was popular interviewer, Jerry Springer, and they were being interviewed. The students' deep familiarity with the popular text gave them a safe place from which to experiment with the new text. The worst reader in the class turned out to be one of the strongest actors. As we witnessed the class' creativity when given the opportunity to show off their oral language resources, Annie and I shared a sense that we were on the right track. In the terms of

our research project, we had data which suggested that opening up the English curriculum to new texts was indeed the way to go.

An aspect of the “reality” of teaching that rarely receives a mention in curriculum research is the difficulty of being the sole adult in a class of up to 30 students. In my experience of professional development sessions, teachers can be brutally dismissive of “creative” ideas which ignore classroom management issues. With 30 boys in a room crowded with desks, it is risky to try drama. But with two adults the risk was much diminished; one could take a group of students into a spare room while the other could manage the rest more easily. For me, a teacher educator for ten years, the collaboration over classroom management was most valuable. I feared I had lost whatever ability I had to “manage” secondary students. An academic, Northfield, says about his year of teaching a year seven class: “The management demands of twenty-five or more students should be experienced regularly by those involved in teacher education.” (Loughran & Northfield, 1996, p. 139) This was certainly true in my case. It significantly increased my understanding of the work of teachers and hence my effectiveness as a teacher educator. One of the benefits of shared projects such as described here is that they bring together teachers from the academy and those from the school into the same teaching space and this process brings empathy rather than the perception of differences.

MULTIPLE DRAFTS WITH 30 STUDENTS

Recent research on the teaching of writing recommends that teachers write with students, that students be encouraged to write multiple drafts (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983) and also that models of various genres be examined (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). All of these approaches are very demanding of teacher time. A classroom teacher with four or five different classes per day cannot find the time for this kind of preparation. Our project unequivocally demonstrated that a partnership can make some of these aspects possible.

To encourage students’ to understand time travel narratives, such as in the novel *Somewhere around the corner* (French, 1994), I made a collection of published narratives and wrote my own. For example, we showed students how *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* (Lewis, 1998) creates an alternative world with very specific sensory details: “But instead of feeling the hard, smooth wood of the floor of the wardrobe, she felt something soft and powdery and extremely cold” (p. 13). The rewards were considerable in terms of students’ writing. Students were able to imitate the published writers in their descriptions. “There was something peculiar about the water my dog was drinking. It sparkled an unusual shiny blue colour. I started to walk closer and closer to the mysterious liquid” (Paul, year seven). Moreover, there were two of us to read students’ drafts which, with 30 students, was invaluable. In a project evaluation 19 students said that having two teachers meant that there was less time to wait for help.

IS ACTION RESEARCH BY TEACHERS VALUABLE RESEARCH?

Ian Mitchell (Loughran, Mitchell & Mitchell, 2002) notes the potential tension between a teacher's goal to improve students' learning *now* and those of the interpretive researcher who can take the time to more meticulously document "what is" (p. 252). Teachers can be impatient with academic research because of its perceived lack of immediate application to Monday morning (Loughran *et al*, 2002, p. 263).

Our project represents a valuable compromise between these goals. The action research model allowed us to shift direction in response to classroom events rather than being bound by a preconceived plan. In one case we had asked the boys to write a brief paragraph in the time travel genre and we found that, instead, the students clamored to write themselves into full-blown fantasy adventures. We had suggested a futurist narrative but many students wanted to set their narrative in the prehistoric era, incorporating their encyclopedic knowledge of dinosaurs. Others wanted to model their stories on computer games. Some used all three genres. As one boy had his hero musing: "What type of dinosaurs could it be? [sic] Hmmmm. I played this game once ... It's called Dinocriss 2. There was a dinosaur bigger than a T-rex". Northfield said of his classroom experience: "My successes in encouraging quality learning came largely from unplanned opportunities when I listened to students and had the confidence and experience to respond at the time." (Loughran & Northfield, p. 138).

In this case it seemed that students really wanted "the freedom to write a story", as Annie put it in her email to me at the time, and our research model allowed this freedom. Moreover, my familiarity with the academic debates about boys and literacy meant that this teaching moment also became a moment to reflect on recent findings about boys and English teaching as our research led us to an unexpected "finding" in relation to gender.

UNPLANNED CONTRIBUTION TO "BOYS AND LITERACY"

Researchers in the field of texts and gender (Cherland, 1994; Manuel & Robinson, 2002; Millard, 1997) have explored the text preferences of boys and girls and argued that there are significant differences. Our project added to the claim of this research that boys' preference is for fantasy adventure compared with girls who prefer realistic fiction about relationships.

Perhaps because of our text preferences as females, we were surprised by the enthusiasm that the class showed for writing their fantasy adventures. The boys' enthusiasm raised the standard of their work as they worked to "publish" a computer illustrated volume called *7D'S TIM3 TR@V3L \$T(0)RY'S* [sic]. What is interesting from the point of view of curriculum research is that our finding came when we were not focused on issues of gender. It is tempting to say that had we set out to find out about what texts the boys wanted to write we would not have made such a "pure" discovery.

Davis *et al.* (2000) discuss what they see as the post-modern perspective that identity in the classroom is a complex of biological, social and cultural identities. It would appear that the students' identities led them to insist that we set aside our curriculum plans and allow them time to express themselves as they wanted. Interestingly, Davis *et al.* (2000) suggest that, given the inevitable multiplicity of needs and goals in any classroom, *group* projects can help to make classrooms less conflicted places. This was certainly true in our case. There were fewer difficulties in managing the class when they were bent over their computer screens drafting their stories for the class book, especially when they were allowed to indulge their love of technology as they searched for appropriate clip art with which to illustrate the work.

It is worth noting, given the contemporary discussion about whether women are not as desirable as men for teaching boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 242), that our identities as women did not prevent us from allowing this moment to happen.

THE PROJECT'S ACHIEVEMENTS

The project's achievements were threefold: It gave the students new language resources, it led to innovation in an ordinary English classroom and it underlined the importance of teamwork, particularly the purposeful teamwork involved in action research.

Our collaborative project ended with an activity which asked students to use the knowledge of the 1930s Depression gained through their study of *Somewhere around the corner* (French, 1994) to create a new text. They were to imagine they were the Prime Minister or Opposition Leader telling the nation how they would deal with the current unemployment. Again we provided models, this time television speeches by politicians. The students' performances of their scripts gratified us as teachers. We saw their mastery of the politicians' clichés as well as their thoughtful ideas: "Australia is a multicultural nation I believe." It demonstrated the ways in which we were able to use traditional novel study to extend students' control of language.

Being a reflective action research project based on the team teaching of two novels, this project had the most simple of designs. All it required was the mutual interest of the teacher-researchers in improving student learning in literacy and the time to plan and reflect on approaches. Its significance as research is bounded in the way that case study research is always bounded (Stake, 1998) by not being able to make claims of transferability. Yet, as has been argued, the project has much to offer English practitioners, most of all its successes in terms of exemplifying creative English teaching in an ordinary classroom. As pointed out in *Learning from teacher research* (Loughran *et al.*, 2002, p. 263) practitioners are looking for evidence that trying new approaches is possible in their situations. As is commensurate with my work as an academic, I had more interest than Annie in communicating with the wider profession about the findings of our project. Hence, although Annie and I have presented our data at a conference, writing about the project has become my responsibility.

If I were doing the project again I would have more confidence in the value of this sharing for teachers as well as those from the academy and involve my teacher partner

in this aspect of the project. While this work might have been demanding of Annie's time, it might have led to further research by her or other teachers.

Northfield argues that "learning about teaching cannot be conducted alone" (Loughran & Northfield, 1996, p. 139). In this project it was certainly true. The action research model is beautifully suited to classroom experimentation but the demands of managing a classroom of young people make purposeful inquiry very difficult to undertake alone. In our case, as has been suggested, each provided the other with support to try new roles. Significant to the teaching profession is that the partnership embodied a way that teachers in schools and workers in the academy can collaborate to improve the quality of teaching for young people without large research grants. The debate about the place of universities (Ramsey, 2000) in contributing to knowledge about teaching would not be as divisive if academics were more often able to work alongside teachers in classrooms.

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