

A fixed point in time and pedagogy

Bringing the 'new' into the primary classroom

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Introduction

Definitions of literacy and how it should be taught in schools have always been subject to close scrutiny and debate (Roberts, 1995). Traditional approaches have conceptualised literacy as a discrete set of skills that can be taught in isolation regardless of context in an 'autonomous' manner (Street 1984; Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). However, the world is changing and the means to which we lead our lives are evolving in a society where diverse communicative practices have become part and parcel of everyday life. In this sense we now communicate through the modes and technologies that society provides with meaning being constructed in increasingly diverse and multimodal ways (Kress, 2003). However despite these literacies, current curricula remain focused on the measured and uniformed progression of print-based decoding skills (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). In the United Kingdom the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) introduced a 'common language' to describe and prescribe literacy teaching in schools. Furthermore, the strategy represents a deeply conservative ideology of what counts as 'literacy' (Urquhart, 2002: 33). While there has been a discourse amongst educationalists that the curriculum needs to reflect 'ideological' literacy and be expanded to take account of diverse literacy practices through meaningful contexts (Street, 1984; New London Group, 1996), little has changed in terms of the curriculum. As Genishi and Dyson state there is an 'awesome disconnect' between the diversity of home literacy practices and school (Genishi and Dyson, 2009: 4). This links with findings from my recent small-scale research where children's views of literacy were consistent with a narrowly conceived definition of literacy focused on print:

"I think it's about learning about verbs and different things and stories. Erm like punctuation and different kinds of... well English" (Interview with Year 6 child – Waller, 2010).

This suggests that the 'common language' of the National Literacy Strategy has had an impact on children's perceptions of literacy with an emphasis on print-based modes. Despite the diverse communicative practices in society and discourses such as the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984) and Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), we are still at a **fixed point** in how literacy is defined and taught in schools. This paper therefore explores different ways I have tried to bring the 'new' into the primary curriculum through projects based on ideological context-driven literacy learning.

Creating a virtual story world – Kiki Flies Again

The first project to be explored is a film-making project that lasted for four weeks and revolved around a text of popular culture, while addressing key objectives from the *National Curriculum* and *Primary Framework for Literacy*. We decided to select a text from a different culture to that of the children called 'KiKi's Delivery Service' by Eiko Kadono, which was available as an engaging picture book and anime film by Studio Ghibli (a world renowned Japanese animation studio). The story revolves around an apprentice witch (KiKi) who moves to a new town and sets up a delivery service using her broomstick. Our project linked with the four areas of multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 1996) and began with a *situated practice* phase where the children took part in activities that immersed them the world of *KiKi's Delivery Service* through character profiling, drama activities, illustrations and retelling of the story. We then progressed to *overt instruction* which involved the children looking at the narrative and how it relates to other texts that they had experienced in the past, particularly fairy-tales. During the *critical framing* phase we looked at the purpose and audience of the text and how we could reinvent the text for a western audience. The final phase of *transformed practice* was achieved through the children inventing their own version of the story by incorporating western fairytales. The children extended the world created by Kadono by including landmarks from fairytales such as forests, castles and cottages. They created a shared narrative where KiKi delivered items to characters such as Cinderella, Peter Pan, the Little Mermaid and the Billy Goats Gruff. The children created their own virtual world using digital technologies by drawing their own backgrounds of the settings then using 'green-screen' techniques to appear in front of them on-screen. The result is an impressive cross-cultural narrative which blended children's own interpretations of story settings within a virtual space. The children in this sense designed and created their own virtual world while learning key literacy skills.

Real world literacy – Brer Rabbit

Our animation project embeds not only a pedagogy of multiliteracies but also a critical literacy approach towards text analysis and production. Although there are several versions of critical literacy pedagogy they all involve an active, challenging approach to reading and textual practices. Barbara Comber describes a number of core principals of critical literacy including subverting taken-for-granted texts, focusing on cultural texts and examining how power is exercised and by whom (Comber, 2001). Our focus for the project was literacy as a critical practice, with work based around the *Uncle Remus* (Brer Rabbit) stories, which were told by African American slaves on plantations in Southern America. We also used the film *Song of the South* which Disney has not released in its entirety in the USA because they fear its portrayal of slavery, and some of its content, may be misconstrued. The oral stories and film provided a good basis for examining the meaning behind texts and considering their meaning in the world (Comber, 2001). The texts also opened up discussion to the area of slavery and prejudice in an open and contextually driven manner. The children followed a similar process to

that of our KiKi project whereby they moved through the different phases of multiliteracies pedagogy with immersion in oral, written and multimodal versions of the Brer Rabbit stories. This helped to develop an understanding that literacy embodies a vast array of modes and textual practices. As the children progressed through the project they began to design their own Brer Rabbit narratives and reinvent the texts for a modern audience. The children also designed and painted the backgrounds for the settings and animated the characters using stop-motion techniques. Technology was not the emphasis of the project but rather the development of critical literacy skills achieved through the embedded and meaningful use of technology.

The project was also greatly strengthened by links to 'The Wren's Nest' birthplace museum of Joel Chandler Harris in the USA. Through the use of the internet children were able to participate in a video conference with an African-American story 'rambler' live from the museum. This not only gave the children the opportunity to engage within wider literacy communities but also discover first-hand the storytelling traditions of the texts they had been exploring.

Literacy in an online virtual network – Twitter @ClassroomTweets

Another embedded way that we use technology on a daily basis is through our use of the social networking system *Twitter*. Web 2.0 applications such as Twitter are becoming increasingly prominent in society because of the way they have transformed how people engage with literacy and the world (Davies and Merchant, 2009). Twitter is a micro-blogging service that allows users to 'tweet' and document snapshots of their life or views using one hundred and forty characters. We use Twitter in class to provide snapshots of our work and reflect on learning. As Jackie Marsh states *reading in this context means not simply decoding, but involves taking part in the construction of social networks where knowledge is co-constructed and distributed* (Marsh, 2010- in press). We regularly receive feedback from followers who offer praise and comments about our work. Therefore the children are reading and writing for a real purpose and audience as well as bringing the world into our classroom.

Conclusion

Heath (1983) described literacy events as constructions and interpretations of meaning, while Street (1997) expanded this idea to suggest that such events have embedded literacy practices according to culture and context. It is clear that events such as a live video conference or literacy exchange on Twitter are authentic literacy events set within real contexts. However, it is not possible to organise such events on a daily basis in a primary classroom. Teachers are accountable to curricula and therefore most activities do contain an element of teacher design. It is perhaps impossible for teachers to embed truly authentic/ideological events into classrooms. There will always, quite rightly, be an element of teacher design or progression of skills in any school curricula. However, contexts which take account of culture and digital technologies can still be used to develop appropriate literacy practices. Stimuli such as video messages, websites or audio recordings can be used in a virtual space to stimulate literacy learning the real world. I therefore suggest that the term 'simulated literacy events' may be a more appropriate term to describe literacy events which have been designed and mediated by teachers. Such events allow teachers to simulate an event linked to popular culture while still developing an understanding of appropriate literacy practices within a school setting.

The projects described in this paper embed literacy practices in meaningful contexts – some truly authentic and others 'simulated' contexts. What is clear is that all of the projects take account of literacy in the real world and ignore the 'common language' (Urquhart, 2002) presented in the National Literacy Strategy. The children who took part in these projects developed an understanding of how multiple modes can be used to communicate while developing multiliteracies and critical literacy practices. The projects were also planned within the confines of the statutory curricula of the United Kingdom while still allowing the children develop skills necessary to succeed in a world with constantly changing horizons.

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