The Responsive Reading Teacher

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Abstract: This paper describes the ways in which a literacy educator attempted to shift her own and pre-service teachers' mindsets towards the needs of 21st Century literacy learners by employing a pedagogy of discomfort. The focus of the disruption was on contesting normative practices and content while developing and refining novice teachers' skills in questioning, listening, noticing, and responding to children, as well as explicit teaching and assessing reading for learning in primary school settings.

The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from the old ones (John Maynard Keynes)

Introduction

Teachers' effectiveness is strongly connected to their capacity to understand, analyse and provide evidence of children's learning within classroom situations (Zottmann, Goeze, Fischer & Schrader, 2010). As the focus in contemporary education has shifted more towards the learners than their teachers, greater attention and accountability needs to be paid to what is being and has been learned. Richard Du Four argues that:

> This shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning is more than semantics. When learning becomes the preoccupation of the school, when all the school's educators examine the efforts and initiatives of the school through the lens of their impact on learning, the structure and culture of the school begin to change in substantive ways. (2002, p. 213)

Shifting attention to learning and the changes needed greatly affects how teachers view themselves and their role as learners; a role they tend to replicate uncritically from being schooled. Many experts (Hattie, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Nystrand, 1996, 2006) among others, warn teachers to stop talking and spend far greater time listening to their students. Hattie, director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, believes teachers' jobs are to see learning through the eyes of children. This new seeing can create purposeful change. Hattie (2009) argues that teachers spend 80% of the time in the classroom talking. The more the student becomes the teacher, the more the teacher becomes the learner. Hattie goes on to argue that the most critical aspect contributed by the teacher is the quality of their teaching as perceived by the students. Feiman-Nemser (2001, p.1015) further Hattie's argument suggesting that 'If conventional models emphasize teaching as telling and learners as listening, reform-oriented models require teachers to do more listening as they elicit students' thinking and assess their understanding and for students to do more asking and explaining.' The results of Nystrand's (1996) three year study focusing on 2400 students in 60 different classrooms indicates that the typical classroom teacher spends under three minutes an hour allowing students to talk about ideas with one another and the teacher (Nystrand, 1996). This talk provides valuable formative assessment, Dylan Williams et al (2004) advocate that assessment should be minute by minute in a

classroom and that incremental changes should be made to a student's learning as it is occurring not merely at the end.

Pre-service teachers enter teacher education programs with firmly entrenched views about the work of teachers provided by at least twelve years of being a student. Popular culture, films about teachers in particular, only serve to reinforce these traditional views. Then novice teachers go out on school placement and they are witness to many of these all too familiar linguistic and cultural practices, serving only to reaffirm their thinking (Author and Faulkner, 2013). These views then become dispositions; habits of mind (Fullan, 1990; Meier, 1995) and one's cultural inheritance. Even though modern society and its members claim to be free in their doings, they are not. In fact, human actions follow patterns inherited from past generations that reproduce practices. Setting out to confront these habits can be assisted by employing a 'pedagogy of discomfort' which is a term coined by Megan Boler (1999) to describe the ways in which seeing and thinking are culturally constructed and to argue our need to examine, through reflective practice, the taken-for-granted assumptions; our willingness to be prepared to be uncomfortable in order to unlearn. Darling- Hammond (2005, 2006) believes that in order for growth to take place in pre-service teacher thinking, beliefs have to be challenged. As well, teachers need to become adaptive experts who continually expand their expertise rather than maintain their status quo as routine experts.

Context

The Graduate Diploma Primary is a one year program with a single semester in literacy soon to be replaced by a two year masters program. There is pressure on academic staff to provide all the relevant content knowledge, skills and understandings these novice teachers require about the reading and writing processes. They also require knowledge about how children develop oral language, reading and writing and viewing, an exploration of literature, multiliteracies, reading strategies, explicit teaching, sharing and contesting current literacy programs and assessment practices. By attempting to thinly cover this large knowledge and theoretical base, far less attention had been paid to skill building or skilling and re–skilling questioning, listening and responding to children and reflecting on known literate practices. As a lecturer in the program I recognised the importance of these skills that may confront old thinking. Through this study I worked to shift greater attention towards active practice that would hopefully foster new questions through reflection and empathic responses. This necessity for this shift in teaching was affirmed with the recognition that at the end of the program, the novice teachers had not retained let alone transferred the theoretical knowledge of literacy that had been transmitted. It was felt that this knowledge had no place to live until it was put into practice and until some of the big ideas presented were challenged through direct experience. While novice teachers often seek certainty, Schon (1983, 1995) reminds teachers that 'real-world situations are characterized by uncertainty, instability, and unique cases that require a different kind of knowledge in identifying appropriate courses of action.' (p.11)

In this literacy subject pre-service teachers had an assessment task to create a case study of a reader. They had to research a child reader between 7 and 12 years of age, analyse their findings and reflect on what they felt the child required next. They were also asked to describe what they as novice teachers had learned by undertaking the case study. Within the task criteria, the novice teachers were asked to find out background information on the child, attitudes to reading, reading habits, the authors and genres the child enjoyed, and the reading strategies the child made use of to make meaning. From interviewing the child the pre-service teachers then selected an appropriate and engaging text for the child to read and conducted a

running record and read/retell. After analysis of all existing data they were asked to support and defend their findings.

Methodological Considerations

In this small self study, I sought ways to challenge existing teaching practices in a literacy subject that would better meet the needs of current pre-service teachers. An action-research approach was undertaken. Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 155) describe action research as 'a form of research which is not research *about* education but research *for* education'. It is a qualitative approach that is context bound, utilises real questions and generates new knowledge with researcher and participants as joint contributors (Levin & Greenwood, 2005). As a reflective practitioner, I used this approach to analyse my teaching. I have kept professional journals over my twenty- six years as a Teacher Educator and through rereading and revising current entries over the past 6 years, in particular, I have been systematically using action research to plan, act, reflect, evaluate, and initiate additions and improvements to my teaching which have assisted in expanding and strengthening pre-service teachers' needs over time (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Burns, 1999). As a cycle of improvement, this process-oriented and collective approach, continues to help me contexualise my knowledge by monitoring teaching and students' learning over time, as well as assisting to make informed decisions about purposeful change. This methodology also assisted me to demonstrate to my students how I used research and developed the skills of observation and critical reflection on my practice with a view towards improving teaching and learning. The approach used can be applied to many aspects of classroom practice such as curriculum development, teaching and learning methods, strategies and assessment (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1993 and Hopkins, 1993).

The focus of this ongoing study was on altering and improving upon practice that might better challenge traditional ways of university teaching of reading and traditional classroom practice in primary schools. In the past six years, the cycles of improvement have broadly been:

2007: To get students to teach more in the tutorials with peer critiques

2008: To reduce overall content in an attempt to deepen understanding and foster unlearning.

2009: To focus on Responding. Provide time for more practical hands-on application of literacy feedback skills. This was informed in part by a Research Project I undertook with other colleagues in the School of Education. I systematically worked to alter my feedback practices to better ensure I provided critical yet constructive feedback early in the semester that would feed-on to other assessed tasks.

2010: To focus on building Questioning skills and continue to refine and reduce content as well as encourage risk-taking Note: In 2009, the semester was reduced from twelve weeks to ten weeks.

2011: To focus on building Listening skills using carefully selected narratives to explore critical incidents and reward risk-taking.

2012: To employ Forum Theatre techniques with critical incidents to role-play and then replay using Questioning, Listening and Responding.

While many of these needed improvements were known to me at the start of the self study, I attempted to implement change slowly in ways that allowed time to alter my own ingrained teaching practices. Aside from ongoing research on disruption, the cycles were informed by data collected from teaching team meetings from the literature in new literacies, from my professional journal entries, critical incidents in the workshops, pre-service teachers' letters

of introduction, subject evaluations and their assessment. It's important to note that the self-study also allowed me time to reflect on what practices I would not alter. For example, reading contentious literature to learners at the start of every session was maintained. By adopting the notion of research to re-*search* - to see each other – I was provided .more informed ways of teaching given the existing challenges. Some of the ongoing discussions with colleagues were around how we might better help pre-service teachers develop a critical stance to existing practices and develop the skills to observe, question, listen and respond to children about reading in the classroom. In this process, of data collection and analysis I wanted to view my teaching and students' learning differently and then seek to alter how these more informed views were being taught. Donald Schon (1995) understood this over a decade ago:

> The relationship between academic and practical knowledge needs to be turned on its head. We should ask not only how practitioners can better apply the results of academic research, but what kinds of knowledge are already embedded in competent practice. (p. 4)

Developing a Critical Stance

The people who undertook the Graduate Diploma Primary were, in the main, highly successful students in their undergraduate studies and came to us from a variety of discipline areas and with a wide array of cultural orientations as far as schooling and work practices. For over a decade I have been handwriting new students an introductory letter where I shared my background, what I was reading for pleasure and a bit about my beliefs about teaching and learning. Their responses back revealed many educational pasts that appeared resistant to confronting educational change. In the main, they wanted to teach children how to 'Do School' to ensure children's academic success. Many letters expressed the desire to teach as they had been taught. Those with literacy backgrounds (ESL teaching, Literature majors, Journalists) were often most resistant to disrupting the conventional norms they had been taught.

The author (2012) argues that:

> Teachers need to reconceptualise what schools can become so that learners explore, problem-solve and design new knowledge within a range of learning communities. New kinds of responsive teachers reflect upon and then enact teaching and learning practices that do not merely replicate past practices that no longer serve learner needs. They create and implement innovative practices that reflect real world issues (p. 257).

Adopting a critical stance allowed these pre-service teachers opportunity to create a sense of agency and the capability to generate change (Fecho, 2004). Over the past 6 years I continued to grapple with ways to present and prepare novice teachers for current practices in schools with respect to teaching reading while also contesting some of the less effective yet ingrained approaches. Questions such as, 'Why would you teach reading that way?' Is there a better was were often asked and were related to such established practices as using levelled readers, fixed ability groups, promoting reading fluency and accuracy over comprehension, limiting reading to published books, teaching reading mainly to learn how to read rather than fostering the pleasures of reading powerful literature in a supportive community, fostering and praising children reading fast and reading a large quantity of texts.

My professional journal entries over the past 6 years in particular, expressed levels of frustration with the lack of time to foster more critically informed novice teachers. The teaching semester was shortened from 12 weeks to ten. The following is representative:

> There is so much to cover in a ten week subject that I approach each class as though I'm in a race that I won't have time to finish. There is so much to get across to these students in such a short amount of time. Constantly under the pump, I feel as if I am literally stuffing my students with information yet with no evidence that the information is being heard or understood let alone heeded. I know I have to teach less, listen more and get my student to experience some alternative approaches but how do I do this?

As well, I too had fallen victim to the routine unexamined practices of university teaching adhering firmly to the lecture tutorial model. While the literacy team also believed that students should develop a critical stance, we were reluctant to streamline the vast amounts of theoretical information transmitted. Slowly I learned to negotiate the constraints of the university teaching model, the relevant content to share, when to share it and in what form. I was then better able to put some of my beliefs into practice. It was also vital that I communicated my level of uncertainty in this new approach to my students. The most potent demonstrations occurred when I revealed feelings of discomfort and how I was attempting to resolve them. Workshops (rather than tutorials) were focussed on building skills in questioning, listening and responding.

The Art of Questioning

The word *interview* (inter-view) meaning to see each other reminds us and our students of the importance of creating a conversation rather than an interrogation with a child in order to learn about them as readers. I discussed the importance of creating a relationship of trust prior to the interview. van Manen (1986) believes that atmosphere is (p. 36) 'created in the way that the teacher is present to the children and the way the children are present to themselves and to the teacher' is essential. This feeling of trust needs to be established and maintained. I shared, demonstrated and workshopped ways in which these relationships might be fostered. I also needed to help the pre-service teachers move beyond children's scripted responses. Nelson (1986) first used the term 'script' to refer to a description of recurrent events to their own beliefs. In order to break through these 'scripts, handed down by parents, siblings and teachers the children's responses needed to be questioned in some detail.

While preparing and conducting their interviews, pre-service teachers were exposed to a wide range of literature in workshops. They were read to and they read to one another at the start of each workshop. They brought in and shared treasured texts from their childhoods. They experienced the pleasures of reading; the pleasures derived from being part of a reading community. This practice was maintained over the 6 years, yet in the past few years, some texts I brought in were deliberately contentious such as *The boy in the striped pyjamas* by John Boyne, *Woolvs in the sitee* by Margaret Wild, *The story of little Black Sambo*, by Helen Bannerman, and some were contentious as school based multimodal texts such as video games, video clips, digital narratives and zines. These texts invited graduate diploma primary students to broaden their view of reading and to learn ways to become more comfortable exploring media texts, digital texts, graphic texts as well as traditional novels and picture books for new learners. The novices expressed and defended their views of each text's social appropriateness, literary quality, inclusivity and its potential to extend and deepen understanding. John Boyne's novel is an example of a novel that raised many hostile views.
I don't think I have ever been so against teaching/exposing children to this text. (Carmel)
The media is stealing childhood innocence; why should we as professionals be stealing it as well? (Emily)
These viewpoints provided fertile opportunities for further discussion.

As our pre-service teachers interviewed their children about their attitudes to reading and strategies they use to read, the art of questioning began to be explored in university workshops as opposed to discussing interviews. Novice teachers were asked about their own reading behaviours. These workshops involved role-playing interviews while asking peers:

Clarifying questions: 'What did you mean when you said you don't like reading?' Art forms, beyond verbal responses are employed. Eliciting drawings, for instance, are often useful for responding to clarifying questions.

Sequencing questions: 'Then what do you do when you still can't understand what is happening?'

Expanding questions: 'Can you show me what goes on in your brain when you read?' Drawings and paintings with labels can also be elicited and are often effective with young children.

Skills in learning how to question a text the child had read, by framing literal, inferential and critical questioning were also explored. In addition, novice teachers kept reading journals as they read and shared a vast array of pre-loved or new picture books, young adolescent novels, films and digital texts in small book talk groups in workshops in order to wrestle with ideas. They made:

Text to Self Connections: 'How do the ideas in this novel relate to your own life?'

Text to World Connections: 'How do the ideas in this novel relate to the wider world today, in the past or in the future?'

Text to Text Connections: 'How do the ideas in this novel, the characters or genre relate to another text you have read or viewed?'

Wolf, Carey, and Mieras (1996) study focussing on pre- service teachers' learning to question found that novice teachers began their case studies in reader response to literature with low expectations for student response. Due to these expectations, low level questions were asked. The questions submitted in the case studies of the novices I worked with also demonstrated low expectations of the children as readers. These expectations were addressed in their case studies where there learning intentions were minimal and often solely at a literal level. These expectations were addressed and work was undertaken to set higher yet realistic expectations on children as readers. Research on the 'self fulfilling prophesy' and on marginalised children and teachers low expectations was offered.

In the last iteration of the subject pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on what surprised them while undertaking the case study. The vast majority were surprised that children who did not read fluently, read through punctuation in a monotone and skipped or changed words while reading, still had strong comprehension well beyond the literal level. Or conversely, children who read with perfect accuracy might not have understood, what they were reading at a literal level. They were surprised at the wide range of reading material children engaged in at home such as graphic novels, video games films and digital narratives. They were surprised that some young children as young as 6 were such strong readers who could read quite complex texts but lacked the background knowledge to interpret the texts. They were surprised that many children could not describe the strategies they used while reading. Novice teachers were also surprised at how little they knew about their own reading strategies. While these contradictions had all been addressed at university, it appeared that only their direct experience with a child allowed them to confront previously held beliefs along with awareness of their own strengths and deficiencies as readers. These surprises were also opportunities to further confront their existing beliefs and draw upon theory to support new beliefs so that they hold onto them in the future.

The Art of Active Listening

Questioning, listening and noticing can be viewed as art forms. There is recognition that each takes time and practise with a focus on what is missing from the conversation, what is not heard, as well as what is heard. Even silences need to be considered, posture and facial and bodily knowing. When we learn how to actively listen, we also learn how to ask questions that are responsive to what we hear. Donald Graves (1991) explains that he tries to listen with two ears. One is to the worlds of children and the other is to his own inner voice. Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2000: 44-45) further argue that:

> ...the emphasis of teaching shouldn't be on giving direction, but on attending to the learning that is happening. Events of teaching are not about certain knowledge but about tentative interpretations. Teaching then, is more a matter of listening than telling. When you do not need to teach you are far freer to listen.

Case studies over the past 6 years indicated that while pre-service teachers were acquiring information about the children in their case studies they were not taking the time but also lacked the knowledge, skills or confidence to question the children's responses further. They often viewed the interview as 'getting the job done.' Having the pre-service teachers tape their interviews, with parental and child permission, allowed them opportunity to listen and re-listen to the child's questions and responses. Workshopping a few of these conversations in greater depth as a small or whole group learning community raised awareness of the tone of the child's responses, the silences that occurred and both the ability and inability of children to express the ideas that matter. This shared experience also demonstrated the vast range of reading abilities. The novice teachers were asked what they noticed as they revisited the interview. As well, they were asked to listen and re-listen to themselves and each other as they engaged in discussion and asked questions and then reflect on ways they might have made more use of active listening.

The case studies received over the years had several features in common. They were thoughtfully described and analysed and respectful of what the children brought to the learning. The novice teachers focused on their children's strengths examining what the children knew, and then provided evidence to justify their analysis. The end of semester surveys each year indicated that the pre-service teachers felt that the case study was a most worthy and revealing learning experience while also highly challenging.

Yet their reflections of new learning were fairly superficial. They had not been offered time to deeply reflect following the experience or to put their new thinking into practice on practicum. Seldom is a primary lesson repeated to try and better its outcomes unless teachers are working with small groups. Therefore, drawing on techniques used in Forum Theatre, from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, some critical incidents that occurred during the practicum were played out in the university workshops with a few novice teachers taking on the role of actors and the other students as spectators. This was another technique used to disrupt normative practices. After watching the re-enactment of the critical incident, alternative scenarios were proposed as to how the incident could have been handled more effectively. Some of the spectators then became the actors as the incident was replayed. This allowed pre-service teachers to experience explicit teaching, varied points of view (as child, teacher, practising teacher, parent...) with greater empathic understanding, and alternative ways they might have approached challenging incidents.

Responding

The explicit teaching of effective feedback practices was given little credence in our program, yet I was aware of its powerful role in shaping students' lives. Black and William's (1998) extensive review of formative feedback drew together 250 studies that spanned all educational sectors. Not surprisingly, the review found benefits of formative feedback to learning across all disciplines and across all levels of education. Feedback has extremely large and consistently positive effects on learning compared with other aspects of teaching or other interventions designed to improve learning. Feedback often asks people to change the way that they read or write or express ideas, or change what they read or write about or express or the way that they think – and at times, the feedback asks them to change who they are. I needed to consider how we were asking students to change. These requests to change are not superficial. Feedback can strengthen or hinder learners' identity by affirming and praising what students know and who students are or on what they lack. Feedback can be a powerful force in fostering learning and the things that are being learned, and it can also prompt students to un-learn in order to re-learn. (Author & Faulkner, 2009) William's (2004) describes feedback as ego involving or task involving and supports the latter. Yet our pre-service teachers on placement reported seeing mainly ego involving feedback and appeared to depend upon perpetuating this type of feedback. They were heard delivering praise such as: 'You're such a strong reader!', 'good boy, good girl and as they handed out stars and stickers, they heard, 'I'm so proud of you for reading such a hard word!'

Tasks involving feedback were practised in book talk groups where pre-service teachers discussed some of the texts. Comments were made such as, 'The connection you made about *The boy in the striped pyjamas* and secrets really made me think about that novel differently,' You said Ben uses incorrect English in *Woolves in the sitee* , can you think of any reason why the author might have him talk that way?''While practising their task feedback I was also provided opportunities to disrupt and challenge ego involving feedback. This type of feedback positions children in the classroom against one another by labelling them the highest level reading group, the best, the middle or the lowest reader. I also explored more 'just in time' feedback; feedback that made peer learning stronger and withholding feedback in order for the learner to provide his/her own task related feedback.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This action research self study allowed me the knowledge and courage to turn my traditional university teaching on its side. Learning to become a far more responsive educator, I needed to focus on the immediate and ongoing needs of the learners. Rather than fill these novice teachers' heads with theoretical knowledge at the outset, it appeared to be far more productive to provide time for novices to practise the skills of listening, noticing responding and working through critical incidents in the teaching of reading. Upon reflection, the pre-service teachers often raised questions about previously assumed teaching practices and framed new questions. From the questions posed and others I posed, current and well established theoretical knowledge and research was provided 'just in time', to further challenge traditional thinking and thinking differently about teaching and the teaching of reading in particular. Responding to learners' needs and sharing the discomfort I experienced while altering my practice provided some safety and encouragement for novices to do the same.
While unable to quantify the changes that have taken place in novice teachers' mindsets, I remain hopeful that some of the new ideas in the teaching of reading find a home in future

beliefs and practices. A colleague and I are conducting further research to follow some beginning teachers and support their critical teaching. In a recent interview one beginning teacher who is team teaching feels his co-teacher is learning from him as she watches his engaging and less conventional approaches. Some students have written about their changing beliefs in their subject evaluations. For example:

> This subject has given me the confidence to plan creatively where learning is not a spectator sport. I believe learners do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorising pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves to become critical thinkers.

Many students started to question the literacy instruction they had undertaken on placement. In the Discussion Board online Nina's comment is representative of this critical view. 'I feel like a lot of what I had seen on placement was 'shallow teaching', sometimes disguised as deep learning. I now feel incredibly conscious of why I teach, what I teach and why my mentors teach what they teach. I feel like I need to justify my teaching.'

Others found a new voice and direction after graduation. For example, Chris, a recent graduate, had strong reservations about using *The boy in the striped pyjamas* when in the program. He recently wrote that he was using the novel with his Year 5/6 students and found that the children loved it! He said that he and his teaching team, now plan 'on the run' with flexible curriculum and flexible reading groups responding in the moment to students' needs. (Email communication 11/2012).

Of course a literacy teaching team is best positioned when it comprises teachers with similar philosophical beliefs about what counts most in the teaching of reading and looks at possibilities in the future as well as firm knowledge of current research. Providing this unified voice allows pre-service teachers with a strong theoretical approach that offers alternative ways of viewing themselves as teachers of reading and alternative views of teaching and of the children they teach. While challenging normative practices, the novice teachers are being provided new possibilities and allowed time to practise these possibilities.

What is needed is teachers' acceptance of the steep unlearning curve (Richardson, 2012) in order to truly transform education. It is essential for all teachers to interrupt, the teaching and learning that seems given or natural (Boler, 2112); to navigate their existing beliefs alongside some disruptions to those beliefs. Boler (1999) advocates a collective process of questioning these fundamental beliefs and assumptions, in order to produce a collaborative effort towards productive change.

To get novice teachers to critically examine normative reading practices it is necessary to offer them support, alternatives and time to develop skills through direct experience. My teaching was greatly informed by a systematic approach to change. I noted direct experience allowed students greater opportunities to reflect and act in action and upon action with a new skills' set. This disruption of the norms of teaching is often uncomfortable yet worthwhile as it can be emancipatory and transformative. Purposeful change in teaching and learning is essential as new readers require new learning opportunities, new texts, new views of what counts as reading. Teacher educators, as adaptive experts, need to question, listen and respond to novice teachers by sharing their theoretical knowledge and resources 'just in time' to take these novices new learning enquiries further.

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