



experts in primary literacies

Many texts cannot be easily classified into one category. To put a 'hybrid' text into one of the defined categories requires a deep understanding of the nature of each text type. When a group of students divided an anthology into these categories, they employed critical analysis of each text type, with sophisticated justifications for their choices. Understanding the structure and purpose of a text helps students when they come to create their own texts.

Special Forever - a critical analysis

Since 1993, the Primary English Teaching Association has been supported by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (M-DBC) to run an environmental communications project, *Special Forever*. Each year this involves teachers and students in about 400 primary schools—approximately 20,000 primary students—across the Basin in Queensland, NSW, Victoria, South Australia and ACT. They focus attention on their local environment to produce writing and artwork that celebrates the life, history and location of their place and its relation to the Murray-Darling river system. This work is submitted to a rigorous judging process for selection of texts for publication in the *Special Forever* anthologies each year, with a panel of professional authors, literacy and literary specialists judging the entries that have come in, and selecting those with ▶

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Students as literacy researchers

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▶ the most impact in terms of aesthetic, stylistic and communicative power. The project results in annual anthologies of student writing and artwork, which are well loved resources and collector's items in homes, classrooms, schools—and the boardrooms of business government agencies connected with the M-DBC.

From 2004–2007, a research project to study *Special Forever* was conducted in partnership with academics from the University of South Australia and Charles Sturt University¹. The study had two major goals. First, it aimed to critically analyse the knowledges and pedagogies related to literacy and the environment that have been developed through *Special Forever*, as exemplified in the materials produced

in the project. Second, it investigated how primary teachers design curriculum and pedagogies which engage students in developing critical knowledge about the environment, and in developing skills for communicating this knowledge in multimedia and multimodal texts. The second aim was realised in the work of the research coordinators, eight of whom published accounts of their action research in the book, *Literacies in Place: Teaching Environmental Communications* (Comber, Nixon and Reid, 2007). Early in the project, the research team conducted an archive analysis: a simple tally comparing the numbers and types of texts published in the first anthology, *Special Places* in 1993, and the 2000 anthology, *Rivers Forever*². As part of its research, the team classified each text in each anthology according to the text type schema in the *NSW K-6 English Syllabus* (1998). This syllabus was chosen as the largest portion of the Basin lies in NSW, and NSW schools and students contribute the largest number of entries to *Special Forever* each year.

The classification and tally were of interest to the research team as all of its coordinators had participated in professional development work in relation to the new syllabus (introduced in 1998). Had this work led to any notable difference in the types of textual work that teachers were introducing to their students?

Table 1:

Researchers' analysis of text types

Text Types	1993	2000
<i>Factual Text Types</i>		
Argument	18	14
Information Report	4	14
Factual description	14	14
Factual recount	4	6
Discussion	0	4
Explanation	0	3
Procedure	0	1
<u>Procedural recount</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
SUB TOTAL	42	56
<i>Literary Text Types</i>		
Narrative	5	4
Observation	20	13
Literary recount	39	3
<u>Poetry/literary description</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>66</u>
SUB TOTAL	147	86
<i>Images</i>		
<u>SUB TOTAL</u>	<u>71</u>	<u>98</u>
TOTAL PIECES	260	240

It was immediately clear from this first analysis that the number of literary texts published in the 2000 anthology was far fewer than in 1993; that the number of artworks published was greater; and that the number of factual texts had increased. One factual text type had a clear increase in publication rate—the information report. While this information is interesting in regard to what it might tell us about the take-up of the new syllabus among NSW teachers, it was also an idea that Pam Davis found herself playing with in terms of its value in her own classroom. Her students were in Year 6, and she was wanting them to revise their knowledge of text types and the structural and language features of the different text types they had studied in previous years, to have a strong basis for their move into secondary schooling.

Teaching as research

Both of us were involved in the *River Literacies* ARC project: Pam as a teacher and Special Forever coordinator, and Jo-Anne as a member of the research team. This meant that Pam was regularly explaining to her students the work that the researchers were doing, and she shared with them what the research team was finding in its analysis of the anthologies. As Lytle (2008, p 373) writes:

“Teacher researchers aim not primarily to ‘do research’, but rather to teach better.”

We share an interest in literacy, and in the sorts of literacy pedagogy that will prove to be *better* for students. In this regard, Pam thought about a better way of engaging her class in activity that would develop meta-level understandings about writing, and the text types they had been learning to master in regular classroom activity.

*I had the thought that we could tackle our own mini research project. I wondered what the students would get from analysing the text in a similar manner to that of the researchers. So as part of our literacy groups we began analysing the 2004 Special Forever anthology *Footprints by the River* - Pam Davis*

This was the brand new anthology at the time, and one that the research team had not yet analysed, or even categorised in terms of text types. Students from Pam’s school had several pieces in the collection, and as always, they had been keen to read the writing and discuss the artwork from their own and other schools. Every year they would review the texts in terms of their reflection of major environmental themes that the class had been studying, and changes that they were noticing in the climate, landscape and farming industry in their own particular place in the Basin—Tongala. This year, Pam shared the researcher team’s table (Table 1) with her Year 6 students, and set them the challenge to see whether they would be able to characterise the texts in the new anthology in the same way as the researchers had.

Pam’s reflection on the research had shown her that the type of analytic thinking required to identify and classify the texts in the anthologies required the researchers to use a deep and expanding knowledge of the structures of the various text types that had been selected for publication. This task required an exercise of

critical judgment—not about the quality of the texts, but about their structure and purpose. This was the sort of knowledge she wanted her students to have, and to be able to draw on when they composed texts themselves. More significantly, she reflected on the commentary that the research team had made about their own analysis—that in classifying many if not most of the texts, the narrow definitional and descriptive models provided by the NSW K–6 Syllabus were inadequate to describe the rich hybridity of the textual forms that they received. The writing in the anthologies is, for the most part, effective and powerful writing, reflecting the strong engagement and commitment to the ideas and messages that students were aiming to communicate about places, people and things that mattered to them. In many cases the writing did not ‘follow the formula’ that teachers had been providing for students when they set out to write a narrative, make an argument, discuss a point of view, explain a process, or provide information about a particular place, person or event.

Pam embarked on a program of work that would allow her students to become more knowledgeable about writing, about individual text types, about collections of writing such as anthologies, and about the meanings and effects such collections can have on their readers. The activities evolved from the research study, but also conformed to the four practices described by Luke and Freebody (1999):

- Breaking the code of texts
- Participating in the meaning of texts
- Using texts functionally
- Critically analysing and transforming texts.

Analysing texts: a program of student work

Pam's plan followed the process the researchers had described in their methodology for classifying the texts. There are three major groupings into which all of the pieces included in the *Special Forever* anthologies can be divided: Factual texts; Literary or fictional texts; and Artworks. The first set of activities aimed to *ensure students understand and begin to appreciate the range of items selected in an anthology for a particular purpose.*

Session One:

Appreciating the anthology as a whole

1. Students read through the whole anthology—looking for poems, stories, artworks, descriptions that they like. They share these with a partner, and tell the partner what appeals to them about the text or artwork chosen.
2. Teacher works from the contents page of the anthology, and notes sections on the board.
3. Students who have chosen favourite texts from a section read or show these to the class, and their partners give the reasons for the piece being selected.
4. Teacher and students review each section and make a summary description of what the texts in that section were about, or what they focused on. Teacher asks about the sorts of texts they have been hearing—are they literary or factual?; poetic or prosaic? If students are guessing or getting this sort of classification wrong, the teacher can provide a brief revision/definition and ask students to classify some individually, and then check for accuracy. When all or most students are classifying these accurately, the class moves on, until the anthology has been worked through. (Teachers can judge the pace of this, and modify the activity, leaving out sections as necessary.)
5. At the end of the session, students talk about what an anthology is. They can discuss how they think this one has been put together, why and how these pieces of work were collected. This of course can lead to more discussion about the purpose of *Special Forever* and the importance of environmental sustainability for the nation.

Having set students the research challenge, Pam then planned to support their action through a short series of lessons that revised text structure and began the recording process that became self-generating as a means of fostering student engagement and commitment to the task as a whole.

Session Two:

Classifying texts according to generic schema

1. Teacher draws up tally chart for class analysis, and selects a number of texts for the initial classification modelling session.
2. Teacher reads one text aloud; students read it silently, then the class discusses what type of text this is, recording it on the tally sheet.

In this way Pam's class became a research team, developing a table of findings that they could add to each day over a week, until they had completed the tally.

The talk during the group work was rich and students were able to back up their text type selection using specific technical vocabulary—such as defending a choice to describe a poem that used a mix of procedure and poetry (exhorting visitors to the river to keep the area free from pollution), as 'a factual poem' on the grounds that it contained 'imperative verbs' at the start of the lines. The students' ability to 'improvise' a rewriting of the text to show how it would have had to be written to not be able to be classified as 'procedural', allowed Pam to see this critical engagement and transformation in ways that she had not encountered in her classroom before. This increasing depth in students' knowledge arose from their engagement in the task—because it was a 'real' challenge, and they were responsible for getting it 'right'. Like the research team, she had set the parameter that the texts had to be classified in terms of their dominant function, and there was no category for 'hybridity'—thereby ensuring that discussion was lively. Pam noted that the students took ownership of the research in their groups and the wonderful literacy talk that evolved was a highlight for her:

Sometimes students disagreed and had to promote their choice strongly as the task involved the group coming to a consensus on each piece - Pam Davis

Pam unexpectedly found that she needed to review the method of tallying with some of the students, and used this as a very useful resource for mental arithmetic games with the class each morning over the duration of the project. The students enjoyed several improvised maths games where one would be chosen to nominate text types for the others to add, subtract, or multiply, and the first with the right answer would take over the nomination role.

For instance, on a double page spread, students would:

- Tally—asking ‘How many poems?’ ‘How many artworks?’, and
- Display the tally sheet for the others to check, to reinforce that four strokes then a line through them is 5.

Table 2:

Students’ tally of 2004 anthology

Factual texts		Fictional texts		Artworks	
Text type	Tally	Text type	Tally	Type	Tally
Recount	###	Narrative	### ### ###	Painting	### ##
Report	IIII	Poem	### ### ###	Drawing	### II
Description	###	Description	III	Artifact	IIII
Explanation	IIII			Mural	I
Argument	IIII			Cut out shape	II
Discussion	II			Collage	### ###
Procedure	I			Installation	III
TOTAL		TOTAL		TOTAL	

After showing the students the researchers’ original tally, Pam put the class’s tally up on the pin board. When she noticed that one or two students were comparing the differences between the 1993 and 2000 anthologies and the 2004 one that they were analysing, she suggested that she would take their work to the research team to compare with the results of their analysis on this anthology. Over time, both the student and professional researchers were able to compare results.

Text analysis in action

Throughout the sessions where they worked with the anthologies, Pam considered that the quality of engagement and the level of conversation the students needed to complete the task was both rich and rigorous.

It was wonderful to hear the children reading the texts and the fruitful discussion about what type of text the writing was. (This to me was the highlight of this task.) This was reinforcing concepts taught during writing and was extremely powerful. The students really needed to understand the text types to be able to classify and I was impressed by their knowledge. Discussions were really useful in helping other students understand the different text types.

The students were really getting into the texts and their construction. They were reading for a purpose, but it was different to what they had been doing previously. The students had always enjoyed looking at the anthologies, but this was in-depth reading and analysis of what they were reading - Pam Davis

Ongoing adaptations

Over the last three years, Pam has used this strategy several times with different classes, and recently revisited the idea using the 2006 anthology, *River of Dreams*. She has also shared the strategy with other teachers who have adapted it to their settings and ideas. Each time, she makes sure that the students are thinking and talking about the texts they are working with, and even though the research project itself is now complete, students are keen to approach the task each year in order to find the differences between the new anthology they are analysing and the one that the previous year's group had worked on. Each time, she starts in a similar way:

We look at the first text, I read it out aloud, students read it silently, and then we discuss what type of text it is. This year, we came to the agreement that we would classify the first text as poetry. We recorded this on our list of text types and built up a list of other possible text types. We decided on our text types and discussed how to best record our tally.

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Over time, Pam has made many adaptations to the original approach. In 2007, for instance, she built on the students' continuing enjoyment of the activity by adding a new curriculum focus on the geography of the Murray-Darling Basin. To do this, she added a step to the text-type classification activity, looking at where the author was from and then tallying the results in a chart. With the students, Pam decided to also look at the artworks, and to classify these according to type and where the artist resided. They talked about classifying the age of the contributor too, but decided they had enough of a challenge so opted not to do this.

Table 3:
Students' tally of contributors

Where in the M-DB?	
Queensland	### ### ### ### IIII
NSW	### ### ### ### ### ### ### ### IIII
ACT	### II
Victoria	### ### ### II
South Australia	### ### ### I

The students worked in multi-level literacy groups. Each had a set of recording sheets. Some groups chose to have one student as recorder; other groups shared this task. The students were given a map of the M-DB to research where the places were, and as they located each town, they added dots to show the spread of selections. As Pam noted:

This was a very useful mapping exercise and increased knowledge of locations and atlas usage. It was also interesting to find that many of the locations did not appear in our atlases so students then had to go to the internet to try to find the location.

This task actually became too difficult and, deciding that it was taking up too much time, Pam abandoned it and moved onto selection of the students' favourite pieces of writing and artwork. It is an idea though that she would like to pursue in the future with better access to maps including the many small towns of the Murray-Darling Basin.

The *Special Forever* anthologies provided a wealth of programming ideas for Pam and the other teachers who have since worked with them.

Other offshoots included:

- **Maths**—aspects of tallying and location
- **SOSE**—mapping, discussion of States, territories and area of the Murray-Darling Basin
- **Science**—reading and discussion of plants, animals, environmental issues and concerns.

Things to do with a *Special Forever* anthology

Art and music activities

- Setting poems to music or rhythm
- Representing an anthology section in music, movement, readers' theatre or visually

Maths activities

- Tallying
- Mental maths
- Estimation
- Ratio and proportion

Science activities

- Studying flora and fauna of particular locations
- Studying river flows and catchment areas
- Reporting on salination in different areas of the M-DB
- Studying causes and effects of drought

Geography activities

- Locating towns and cities
- Using internet
- Population mapping
- Investigating reasons for town locations

History and civics activities

- Charting state borders and boundaries
- Comparing these with the boundaries of Aboriginal lands
- Researching the Aboriginal language groups of the area, cultures and sacred sites in the MD-B
- Charting routes taken by explorers
- Finding out about industry around the M-DB

English/language activities

- Investigating Aboriginal names for places
- Finding meanings of first and family names of contributors
- Making parodies, responses, and reviews of individual anthology texts

Literacy/multiliteracy activities

- Emailing other contributing schools
- Making film/PowerPoint presentations illustrating sections or individual texts
- Creating graphic outlines of new hybrid text types

Reflections

Teachers are constantly adapting their practice to meet the needs of their students, and use both theory and experience to inform their decisions.

For Jo-Anne, as a researcher, Pam’s classroom practice provides an excellent example of Lytle’s (2008) argument that teachers strive to make schools better places for student learning and, in their attempts, gain important knowledge about practice through their own diligence and ingenuity.

Lytle claims that “most research on teaching still locates expertise several layers out” from classroom practitioners, and urges us to rethink what it means to regard teaching as having a professional responsibility to continually make things better (2008, p 375).

Footnotes

1 Barbara Comber, Helen Nixon and Phil Cormack (UniSA), Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid (CSU): *Literacy and the environment: A situated study of multimedia literacy, sustainability, local knowledges and educational change*. ARC Linkage project with the Primary English Teaching Association of NSW 2004–2007.

2 A fuller account of the larger analysis can be found in Cormack, P, Green, B and Reid, J (in press) ‘River literacies: discursive constructions of place and environment in children’s writing about the Murray-Darling Basin’ in F Vanclay, J Malpas, M Higgins and A Blackshaw (eds.) *Making Sense of Place: Exploring concepts and expressions of place through different senses and lenses*. National Museum of Australia, Canberra.

References

Board of Studies NSW (2007) *K-6 English Syllabus*. Board of Studies NSW, Sydney.

Comber, B, Nixon, H and Reid, J (eds) (2007) *Literacies in Place: Teaching Environmental Communications*. PETA, Newtown.

Luke, A and Freebody, P (1999) *A map of possible practices: Further notes on the four resources model* Practically Primary, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp 5–8.

Lytle, S (2008) ‘Practitioner Inquiry and the Practice of Teaching: Some thoughts on “Better.”’ *Research in the Teaching of English*, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp 373–379.