Literacy Learning: the Middle Years

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Off the bookshelf

_Literacy in the middle years: Learning from collaborative classroom research_

Reviewed by Catherine Smith

Title: _Literacy in the middle years: Learning from collaborative classroom research_
Authors: Anne-Marie Morgan, Barbara Comber, Peter Freybody and Helen Nixon, with Helen Grant, Ruth Trimboi, Marg Wells and Melissa White
Publisher: Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETA), 2014.

It is always great to learn about what other Australian middle years teachers are doing in their classrooms. Thanks to this book based on Australian Research Council (ARC) funded research, we have been offered a look into six schools and the practical research projects their teachers undertook in developing new ways to meet the changing literacy needs of their students. The book showcases a range of activities conducted in both primary (Years 5–6) and early secondary (Years 8–9) classes.

Why literacy again? It was heartening as a teacher to see that those undertaking this project began with this question. We can be inundated by pedagogical-information overload in the education world, with thousands of articles and books vying for our attention. However, I was quickly convinced by the authors that this book on literacy was worth a read. Why? Because it acknowledged that although literacy is ‘subject to ongoing change’ (p. 4), it is extremely helpful to respond to the demands ‘of a particular setting at a particular time’ (p. 4). Consequently, the authors provide six chapters of detailed, practical and relevant activities that acknowledge and build on real student literacy experiences of 2014.

Marg Wells and Ruth Trimboi from Woodville Gardens School in Adelaide give details of how they deliberately connected their students to the local community. Students developed literacy skills in information gathering through being ‘journalists’ in and out of the school setting. They also created class books on unique features of their local community and some of the changes that were taking place through development projects.

Helen Grant, from Gilles Street Primary School in Adelaide, shares innovative activities she had developed for the many English as an Additional Language or Dialect learners in her multicultural setting. Her ideas and games for exploring cultural identities could also be used in the mainstream class as they acknowledge and explore our inherent hybrid nature. Grant shares some practical ideas for using photography and filmmaking to develop literacy skills in creating and publishing texts in contemporary ways.

Chapter 4 explores the important areas of specific literacy demands in the subject areas of Science, Mathematics and History. Middle years teachers recognise that students are required to read to learn the subject matter, and must also learn to write in a subject specific style. Peter Freybody and Ann-Marie Morgan argue that this presents specific challenges that teachers, who traditionally do not
see themselves as literacy educators, must learn to explicitly scaffold for their students. They show approaches for teaching about scientific reports, mathematics-specific language and writing techniques in Studies of Society and the Environment.

I found Chapters 5 and 6 particularly helpful. Anne-Marie Morgan presents up to date information about the ‘digital domain’ in which our students live, including mobile phone, internet and social media use primarily based on data provided by the Australian Communications and Media Authority research. This leads beautifully into the next chapter on ‘Guiding students’ internet research’. Melissa White provides an excellent process for improving her Year 9 students’ capacities to ‘recognise information that is from a reliable source, to select material that is directly relevant to the topic they are investigating, and to learn to explore effectively a range of information on a topic’ (p. 92). White’s practical tips for the Three R’s of internet research will definitely become a part of my daily classroom practice.

Anne-Marie Morgan returns to a more detailed, whole school approach to ‘Reading and writing Science’ in Chapter 7. She explains the necessities of helping students develop technical language and an understanding of the genres of science writing. She provides student work samples to show evidence of the activities they implemented. Practical support is offered for science teachers to develop confidence and skills in teaching their students the specific science related literacy skills required for activities such as explanatory writing.

The eight authors of this book take explicit care to caution their readers about the generalisability of the work. The goal of their combined project was to provide a range of examples of how teachers and schools are collaboratively responding to the literacy demands of their communities. Each case study provides an innovative springboard for readers to consider their own setting in terms of student literacy needs and the collaborative opportunities to meet them.

I encourage fellow teachers not to be put off this book by the long title and the plain cover. It is 150 pages of ideas that can stimulate powerful thinking and effective planning to address our students’ changing literacy needs. I am left considering what is distinctive about the setting and context of my own students: Are there place-based literacy opportunities that I can take hold of with my class? Are there better ways to support specific subject teachers with scaffolding skills for the literacy demands of their subject content? How can our students and teachers engage effectively with the constantly changing demands and skills of this digital culture?

The overall theme of the book is to stimulate collaborative discussions. Not only will shared research and practice improve our ability to meet student literacy needs, but collaborative activities inspire and encourage one another to continue the innovative work we often do behind a closed classroom door.

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