

A systematic approach to literacy support for first year preservice teachers: implications for practice.

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Abstract

Concerns about teacher standards and teacher quality particularly in literacy, numeracy and science and their impact on student achievement are prevalent in current Australian federal and state reports and responses. The *Masters Review* (ACER, 2009) into improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland schools identifies the clear need for preservice teachers to demonstrate high levels of proficiency in these areas (p.viii). The Queensland government response to the report has been to introduce mandatory preregistration testing in literacy, numeracy and science. These tests are being trialled in 2010 with a view to full implementation in 2011.

In 2010, a team of researchers at James Cook University School of Education in Cairns (Adam; Jackson, Taylor & Adam; Taylor, in press) has undertaken an innovative pilot study to investigate student academic literacy proficiency of preservice teacher education students on entry to the program and provide a range of strategies and support for those at risk. This paper forms part of a symposium on the first year literacy initiative (FYLI) and presents some implications for the author's practice as a lecturer in the first year professional studies subject. Findings suggest that a systematic, collaborative and consistent approach to literacy testing and intervention has benefits for both students and academic staff. Furthermore, such an approach is consistent with first year curriculum design principles (Kift, 2009) and successful transition pedagogy (Wilson, 2009)

Keywords: academic literacy; teacher education.

Introduction

This paper provides initial findings and implications for practice within a core first year subject and directions for further research from the *First Year Literacy Initiative* (FYLI) in the School of Education of James Cook University. The FYLI is a pilot phase of an ongoing action research project in literacy involving 100 first year Bachelor of Education students. It is a “cyclic, coordinated, contextualised and connected, sustainable and adaptable approach to literacy learning in a tertiary context” (Adam, 2010, forthcoming, p.1) through collaborations between first year lecturers, learning support staff, teachers and preservice teachers.

The University has a long tradition of providing quality teacher education in regional and remote Queensland and access to tertiary study for traditionally marginalized groups: first in family to attend university; mature-age women; Indigenous; low socio-economic background. As a long-term lecturer in the core first professional studies subject of the Bachelor of Education degree, *Foundations of Education*, and the first year coordinator, I have grappled with the complexity of implementing a transition pedagogy (Kift, 2008), scaffolding academic and professional learning and developing highly literate graduate teachers. This complexity has intensified in recent years with competing and sometimes contradictory imperatives for teacher educators. The implementation of key recommendations from the *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report* [Bradley Review] (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), for example, to widen participation in higher education stands in contention with calls from the teacher registration authority in Queensland, the *Queensland College of Teachers*, to apply more rigorous entry standards into teacher education programs. Furthermore, reports such as *A shared challenge: Improving literacy, numeracy and science learning in Queensland primary schools* [Masters Review] (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009) have given rise to mandatory preregistration testing for Queensland primary teachers in literacy, numeracy and science from 2011. Literacy proficiency is high-stakes for preservice teachers and teacher educators.

Conceptualisation of Literacy

What counts as literacy in terms of academic success at a university level and which literacies teachers in Queensland will need to be able to demonstrate in the testing is very unclear. There is little literature about the particular kinds of academic literacy education students need to be successful in tertiary study and, to date, the Queensland College of Teachers has provided no information as to what kinds of literacy are to be tested other than to say both content and literacy pedagogy will be addressed. Literacy is a highly-contested field both in higher education and at a school level. Luke (1995) proposes

Literacy education acts as an institutional gatekeeper to reading and writing practices. Schools, universities, publishers, state departments of education and other affiliated institutions influence who gets what access to kinds of reading and writing practices, and also which representations and version of the world get presented as legitimate to read and write about...models of reading are based on particular visions of the social order, and how the literate person should fit into that social order.” (p.168)

Current federal government emphasis on national standardised testing in schools (NAPLAN) and teacher registration authorities' focus on preregistration literacy testing raise a forceful discourse of deficit (focussed on parents, students and practising teachers) and blame (focussed predominately on teacher educators). Teacher educators are in a difficult position, not least because there is no one commonly-held definition of literacy. Whilst there is general agreement in academic literature (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1995; Green, Hodgens and Luke, 1997; Luke 1996; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Nixon, 1997) that literacy is, or rather literacies are, inseparable from the practices in which they are embedded and the effects of these practices, the kinds of literacy institutionalised in NAPLAN, preregistration and other such high-stakes, high-value tests reduce literacy to a simplistic toolkit of decoding and encoding skills. This distinction is significant in that it highlights a harsh contradiction between contemporary academic literature and the narrowing of the concept to a series of mass-measurable skills which is an inevitable feature of standardised tests in whatever context. Therein lies the rub for teacher educators. Literacy education is not value-neutral. Literacy education in a tertiary context can itself mediate who gets access to which literacies and replicate existing inequalities. Lankshear (1998) cautions us against uncritically engaging with the "huge priority currently being attached to the 'lingering basics'" (p.10) and counsels:

Unless we are careful here we may unwittingly contribute to consolidating a new word order, which will mediate in powerful ways access by individuals and groups to places and rewards within the new work order, as well as evolving civic and cultural domains. (p.10)

A challenge for teacher educators implementing any initiative focussed on improving teacher literacy is to maintain and model a well-theorized position about literacy as a "repertoire of practices (Education Queensland, 2000) whilst scaffolding and teaching the explicit operational skills required for academic success and registration as a teacher. This was a particular concern for us in the FYLI team. More specifically, we wished to resist the institutionalisation of "official knowledge perspectives that benefit those who are already the most powerful groups in society" (Apple, 1996, p.100) and a decontextualised pedagogy (Lingard, 2001) of and about literacy.

The FYLI approach

Conceptualisation

The team of first year lecturers in the undergraduate program in collaboration with student support staff decided to undertake and research an innovative pilot study to investigate the academic literacy proficiency of preservice teacher education students on entry to the program and provide a range of strategies and support for those at risk. This paper provides some initial findings and implications from the action research component of the pilot program drawing upon data collected within the early weeks of the first core professional studies subject, *Foundations of Education*.

Adam (2010, forthcoming, p.7) refers to five conceptual binaries we grappled with as a teaching and action research team in the development of the FYLI: i) narrow or expansive definitions of literacy, ii) student or staff responsibility for literacy learning, iii) screening or supportive uses of diagnostic testing, iv) localised or standardised literacy knowledge, and v) extrinsic or intrinsic approaches to literacy. We agreed to focus on academic literacy with “traditional emphases on reading and writing written texts and modern emphases on multimodal texts, multiple literacies, new literacies and critical literacy.” (Adam, 2010, forthcoming, pp.2-3)

The approach, described in detail in Adam (2010, forthcoming) took the form of a literacy guide (*Literacy Survival Guide*), two forty-minute diagnostic tests, an online test bank, a literacy assessment rubric, literacy lecture segments, workshops, group literacy support sessions and individual tutorials. We tried to strike a balance between staff and student responsibility for literacy learning in that staff willingly took up the responsibility to teach explicitly and support student literacy learning whilst literacy assessment rubrics and processes placed some accountability back on students. The elements of literacy in the *Literacy Survival Guide* were standardised (vocabulary; spelling; grammar, punctuation, style, structure, referencing, reading comprehension, critical reasoning, ICTs and examinations) but these were also contextualised through the localised and personalised literacy guide and the literacy demands of particular subjects.

An action research approach

As a teaching and research team we adopted an action research approach. The design, implement, reflect, refine cycle of action research as a methodology ensured that the FYLI would remain evolving and adaptable and encouraged us to collect, examine and critically analyse its implementation within and across different (subject) contexts.

Context-prior to FYLI

Foundations of Education is the core first year professional studies subject in the Bachelor of Education degree for all students. The subject focuses on the sociology of education and includes five days of professional experience in a school. The first major assessment piece in the subject is an expository essay. Since 2005, I have conducted formative assessment related to students’ academic writing competency in the first week of this subject. Students would complete a short expository writing task and receive feedback on elements of literacy in their academic writing by week 2. Those students who had difficulties were encouraged to access support from the University learning support services, were assigned a student mentor and I conducted one hour (unresourced) literacy-focussed sessions each week until submission of the first major assessment in Week 5. Students received specific literacy feedback on their first assessment using the same rubric used in the week 1 formative academic writing task. I explicitly taught each literacy element on the rubric in short weekly lecture segments over the 13 weeks of the subject modelling pedagogies which preservice teachers could use within classrooms during professional experience. I collected literacy data from the formative testing and these provided useful baseline indicators of the elements of literacy students had

consistently found problematical. Although student feedback has been consistently very positive about these strategies, a real dilemma for me (and for students) was that this approach was systematic and contextualised within the subject but not necessarily within the program. Nor, from the students' perspective, was there a discernable developmental sequence in terms of academic literacy or literacy pedagogy across the four years of the degree. The FYLI thus provided an opportunity to collaborate with a wider group of colleagues and be more systematic and consistent across the program regarding literacy standards, assessment and teaching.

How the FYLI was implemented and research data collected in the *Foundations of Education* subject

Adam (2010, forthcoming) describes the FYLI design in detail. In summary, the initiative took a cyclical approach of awareness, diagnosis, support and accountability and data were collected from 100 students who had signed informed consent to forms.

Awareness phase

There was a short presentation about the initiative in the week 2 lecture which outlined the purpose and processes of the FYLI. The presentation emphasised five elements of the initiative: the link between academic literacy, core subjects and the teaching profession; the balance between literacy support and accountability provided through the FYLI; the opportunity to participate in research to develop the FYLI; the contextuality of academic literacy and; the current political focus on preservice teacher literacy. Students were given a hard copy of the *Literacy Survival Guide* (see Adam, 2010, forthcoming, p.6) and inserts advertising support sessions from university learning support staff.

Diagnostic phase

Students completed two forty-minute tests in lecture time: one in the *Foundations of Education* subject and one in the *Foundations of Information Technology* subject immediately afterwards. One test involved short responses to specific literacy elements outlined in the FYLI framework and resources. The other test was an extended piece of writing focused on students' own literacy narratives. The tests were scored for literacy competency in vocabulary; spelling; grammar, punctuation, style, structure, referencing, reading comprehension and critical reasoning. Results from these tests were used to identify a group ($n=30$) requiring additional literacy support. Thematic data is currently being collected on the literacy narrative task. Students were also asked to give feedback to the FYLI team via email about their experience of the testing.

Support phase

In addition to the hard copy of the *Literacy Survival Guide* and flyers about learning support workshops provided by the teaching and learning division of the University, students were also directed to a site within the University online teaching platform which housed an

electronic version of the guide, support resources and self-paced online tests. I also provided open invitation weekly literacy support sessions.

Accountability phase

A *Literacy Assessment Rubric* aligned to the online resources and self-paced tests was used in the first major piece of assessment in the subject (expository essay). Literacy criteria were again graded by an independent marker who will continue to mark assessment across subjects in 2010 to ensure consistency and to provide specific, comprehensive literacy feedback to students. The rubric indicated areas of literacy strength and recommendations or requirements for students if they wished to improve their literacy grade on this piece of assessment. Data relating to student take-up of this opportunity were collected.

Findings

The diagnostic test raised a number of issues which had not occurred in the subject before. Whereas the previous short test I had conducted in the subject in week 1 was contextualised within the subject, the FYLI test was considerably longer and positioned within broader professional imperatives, including imminent high-stakes preregistration literacy testing requirements. High levels of test anxiety in some students despite our clear statements that the intent was diagnostic and formative were identified in the email feedback data about the test-taking experience. Comments such as

Now I feel like this course may not be for me. I really want to be a teacher but I don't know whether I will ever be good enough.

and

Doing this test just brought back all the nightmares from school. By the time I got to the reading section I had given up. It made me question why I was doing this course at all.

provide some insight into test anxiety and students' lifeworlds which are now being explored through case studies and thematic analysis of their literacy narratives in the second test item. Student narratives about their personal literacy experience are providing valuable data for academic staff to know the learners in our subjects more deeply, connect with their experiences and support their literacy learning more effectively. In one such case study, the student who is typical of a significant number in the cohort, entered the program as a mature-aged student from a childcare background. Her literacy narrative revealed that her prior experience of study and work involved little emphasis on academic reading or writing. Her entry qualification had required her to demonstrate content knowledge and workplace competencies that bore little relationship to the academic demands of a Bachelor of Education program. She related

I need to address every area of literacy. It is overwhelming. I have so much to concentrate on at once...and it takes me ages...and I am worried that I won't succeed no matter how hard I try. I agree, though, that as teachers we need to be really, really

good at literacy. These [individual] sessions are really helping, not just to make me better at literacy but they are helping me see that maybe I can make it.

The systematic approach which characterises the FYLI has provided cohesion and consistency for students and staff and mobilised the scarce resources available to both groups in effective ways. A collaborative approach and the online resources have provided some hitherto unavailable teaching space for me to see self-nominating students in more individualised sessions. Students have reported that these one-on-one (or two) tutorials have been very beneficial. For, example, two students were from non-English speaking backgrounds (German) and just one tutorial session with these students allowed me to address longstanding confusion they had about one very specific aspect of English quickly and easily. However, there was very poor takeup of individualised sessions by students across the cohort. Just four ($n=150$ students enrolled in the subject) attended regularly. Interestingly, a survey given to students after completion of the first major assessment, (Taylor, Jackson & Adam, 2010, forthcoming) indicated that almost one third ($n=30/98$) had referred to the guide to assist their assessment. I need to investigate further the poor takeup of individual sessions but prior research into the first year experience (Taylor & Worsley) indicates that students prefer to have informal sessions in social spaces with lecturers rather than having to break through the intimidating “glass doorway” into an academic office.

In terms of the operational aspects of English literacy tested in the first forty-minute diagnostic test, referencing, grammar and critical reasoning were areas that proved more problematical for students than vocabulary, spelling, style, structure and reading comprehension. These data confirm data I had collected over the five previous years. More analysis of these is currently being undertaken.

The student experience of the diagnostic testing brought home though personal experience the realities (and inequities) of standardised testing in literacy and provided a useful focal point for critical engagement with students’ subjectivities and prior experiences in (English) literacy in lectures and tutorials. These discussions also opened up possibilities for students to excavate their own literacy narratives and to see how prior experiences have impacted on their literacy learning and perceptions of themselves as literate adults.

From the perspective of my own teaching, prior to the FYLI my isolated data collection from the short formative task captured predominantly the technical aspects of literacy and then only within the very localised and context of my individual subject. The FYLI design, as Adam (2010, forthcoming , p.4) states, “balances instructional approaches to literacy that emphasize the imparting of knowledge, with ‘dialogical approaches’ to literacy (e.g. Chanock, D’Cruz & Bisset, 2009) that emphasize the construction of knowledge through engaged conversation in [a much broader] context.” and this was clearly valuable for staff and students. The FYLI provided a focal point for action research and staff discussion about literacy and a community of practice within which shared understandings and pedagogies have begun to enhance our collective capacity to teach and research literacy in our context and respond better and more effectively to our students’ needs. Furthermore, the FYLI design

and approach is entirely consistent with a well- theorised way forward in terms of modelling effective literacy pedagogy to and with our students.

Implications for practice

Already in these very early stages of the pilot, I can see three major implications for my own practice as a teacher educator. First, I have adjusted my literacy pedagogy within the subject to foreground students' personal literacy narratives within wider debates about literacy and knowledge construction generally. Prior to this initiative I would engage students in concrete experiences to encourage deep learning of abstract concepts. However, strategies which encourage students to excavate their personal literacy narratives would provide greater connectedness for the students. Second, initial thematic analysis of the extended writing diagnostic test and individual case studies suggests that I need to revisit in collaboration with my colleagues how I, and we, might teach academic reading explicitly. Student narratives show that many, whether mature age or straight from school, have little prior experience with academic texts. Third, the action research approach of this pilot has given me access to valuable data and strategies regarding individual student literacy performance in different contexts and in different types of literacy tasks than in *Foundations of Education* and allowed me to be responsive to issues and students in a more effective and timely way. For example, data on student perception of literacy strategies used by Jackson (Jackson, Taylor & Adam, 2010, forthcoming) shaped my assessment feedback practices in a later task. The collaborative and systematic approach of the FYLI has been professionally nourishing and challenging.

Implications for further research.

The FYLI has already provided academic and learning support staff with valuable insights into how to better support students' literacy learning (and teaching). The action research approach has highlighted areas in the resources and processes that need adjustment. Student narratives about their personal literacy histories related in the extended writing diagnostic test and in individual support sessions have provided rich data which are now being thematically analysed. These data may provide windows into students' lifeworlds and experiences which in turn allow us to respond better to their needs. Currently, multiple sets of systemically collected fine quantitative (student demographic, literacy error frequency, takeup and use rates of FYLI support, surveys) and qualitative data (thematic analysis of narratives, focus group interviews, individual case studies) are being collected and may provide confirming or disconfirming evidence related to professional and federal assumptions about preservice teachers, teacher education programs and teacher educators. Specifically, we are looking at which aspects of literacy are proving problematical for which groups of students; whether in our context there is, in fact, a relationship (and at what level) between Overall Position (OP) entry levels into the program and literacy and academic achievement; the relationship between literacy performance in different subjects and; the relationship between literacy proficiency and retention within the program.

Conclusion

Although the convergence of top-down federal government imperatives, changes in teacher registration requirements and localised concerns provided the catalyst for the FYLI, its evolutionary processes have been organic and bottom-up. The pilot has been conducted with little resourcing and is not reliant on non-continuing funding or expertise. Although academic staff have invested significant time in the FYLI, payoff has been immediate both professionally in developing more effective pedagogies, and in terms of research output. This increased research activity will actually generate more resources for the project through teaching workload adjustments. The model then, is clearly a sustainable one. Perhaps, most importantly for us as teacher educators in the current policy climate in Australia, this project may provide an evidentiary base to support, resist or contest popular and populist 'commonsense' deficit assumptions about preservice teachers and their educators.

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