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Connecting literacy learning outside of school to the Australian Curriculum in the middle years

Glenn Auld | Deakin University, Victoria
Nicola F. Johnson | Federation University Australia, Victoria

ABSTRACT

The complexity of teacher’s work is manifest in the divergent use of digital technologies in and out of school. This paper explores the logical step of connecting students’ out-of-school mediated literacy learning to the content descriptors of the Australian Curriculum. The study uses published evidence from four previous studies of young people to demonstrate the diverse ways that out-of-school practices can be linked to literacy learning in the Australian Curriculum. We frame this linking of informal literacy learning to the Australian Curriculum by highlighting the ‘funds of knowledge’ children bring through the school gate.

Introduction

Imagine a school system where all teachers and students worked a four-day week. You might think this would be impossible given the current crowded curriculum; but, if the students improved their learning by 20%, we could cover the same content in a shorter week. What would be the basis of such a system? How could learning in literacy be more effective? What is the core business of a literacy teacher in the middle years and how could this core business be achieved more effectively? Is it possible that some of the core business of middle years literacy might be evidenced in the informal learning practices (Furlong & Davies, 2012) that young people engage in outside of school?

Background

This article will explore some ideas about linking literacy learning to everyday social practice. This is not a new concept, but we will attempt to link young people’s out-of-school learning with digital technologies to the literacy content descriptors of the Australian Curriculum. This work is located in a sociocultural approach to learning as documented by Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992), who suggested that effective teachers draw on culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills in their teaching. The ideas of ‘funds of knowledge’ have been used by literacy researchers. The literacy learning by middle years students outside of school in an Australian context has been documented by Rennie and Patterson (2008). We argue that researchers of literacy have not made the links between these informal learning contexts and the more formal learning documented in the curriculum.

There are several ways of constructing respect for students and their funds of knowledge. One way is obviously to respect the students as literacy learners. They each bring their own way of seeing the world, mediating their learning and negotiating a range of networks in outside-of-school contexts where literacy learning is supported and developed over time. A second related way is to explore spaces where curricular outcomes are being enacted in everyday social practices. Such a respect for these inhabited spaces can be central to repositioning the work of teachers so they can locate learning in other spaces outside of the classroom.
This article presents vignettes from four published studies. A short description of each study is provided and each vignette is analysed for the literacy learning outlined in the study and for how this learning is connected to the English Learning Area of the Australian Curriculum (see Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Where possible we have used quotes from the participants to provide evidence of the literacy learning. Where the study has provided the age of the participants we have used this as a basis for the links to the curriculum. We hope that the analysis of these studies provides a timely contribution for teachers to make connections between the English Learning Area of the Australian Curriculum and learning that occurs in the out-of-school lives of young people.

Vignette 1

In a two-year project, Furlong and Davies (2012) explored the use of technologies inside the home with young people aged 8 to 21. They surveyed 1,069 young people to identify their uses of technology inside and outside educational institutions. They conducted 132 interviews with participants from the survey and, from this selection, focused on 35 of the participants in more depth with another interview and an observation of their home use. From these data, they presented a framework of ‘informal learning practices’ that they claimed to be pedagogies of learning at home with ICTs. In an illustration from one of the case studies they presented, the participant Kirsty describes how she had used StumbleUpon to find a different translation of Homer’s *Iliad* from the translation she was using in the classroom:

> So when we were doing a particular chapter I could print out the relevant bits and take it into school and say, this is how this translation compares with the current translation ... So to have two different translations means you can say, these are the two possible takes on this ... passage. (Furlong & Davies, 2012, p. 55)

From this excerpt, we can identify the following links to the Australian Curriculum: English. From the Literature strand – examining literature, Year 5, ACELT1610 – ‘Recognise that ideas in literary texts can be conveyed from different viewpoints, which can lead to different kinds of interpretations and responses’, and Year 9, ACELT1772 – ‘Analyse text structures and language features of literary texts, and make relevant comparisons with other texts’.

Ways of learning identified by the research team at home included ‘fiddling about’, observing expertise, and ‘producing, reviewing and re-producing’. Kirsty explained this last point in relation to learning web-design:

> The first sites you start off with, they’re like a background colour and you have this big scrolling monkey and loud sounds ... Just to prove that you can, and all the colours are crap, like clash terribly. And then as you move on and you get better and better it’s exactly the same coding ... But you make it more subtle and more elegant, and it all fits in and it works better and you get slightly more complex. (Furlong & Davies, 2012, p. 57)

Strong links to the Year 9 Australian Curriculum: English include Literature – creating literature, ACELT1773 – ‘Create literary texts, including hybrid texts, that innovate on aspects of other texts, for example by using parody, allusion and appropriation’, and Literature – creating texts, ACELY1747 – ‘Review and edit students’ own and others’ texts to improve clarity and control over content, organisation, paragraphing, sentence structure, vocabulary and audio/visual features’.

Identifying the informal learning practices Years 5 to 9 students engage with, and highlighting and sharing the artefacts they produce in their home setting, might lead to the further identification of curricular achievement, not only in the English curriculum area. If curricular coverage is evident outside of the school setting, then the stakeholders interested in teachers’ core business is extended and the informal learning practices can be validated.
Vignette 2

The second vignette is research presented by Auld, Snyder and Henderson (2012) about the use of mobile phones in a remote Indigenous community. The article explores how phones are ‘placed’ resources, following the work of Blommaert (2010) which suggests that artefacts such as phones are embedded in a web of diverse practices dependent upon the social location. While the study was based on a survey of phone use, the study also presented a literacy event between a child and her mother at home. This literacy event was based on the mother teaching her child how to download music and games from an Internet site to her phone.

This vignette involved a child purchasing a song from the internet. The child followed the mother’s instructions about how to scroll through the songs and identify the chosen song to download. Part of this learning involved playing a segment of the song before downloading, to make sure it was the appropriate download. At the end of the download, the child stated, ‘You showed me Mum, I know how to buy music now’ (Auld et al., 2012, p. 290). Although the language between the child and mother was mediated in Ndjébbana, an Indigenous Australian language, the text on the phone was in English. The child demonstrated an ability to navigate through the online environment, using the breadcrumb trail design embedded in the web page.

As such, the child was understanding the breadcrumb trail for online texts (i.e., ‘Understand that the coherence of more complex texts relies on devices that signal text structure and guide readers, for example overviews, initial and concluding paragraphs and topic sentences, indexes or site maps or breadcrumb trails for online texts’ (Australian Curriculum: English, Year 7, Language, Text structure and organisation, ACELA 1763). The breadcrumb trail helped to scaffold the steps to buy the song. Given the bilingual context of this vignette, there are important elements of this learning that are not adequately covered in the Australian Curriculum. The child’s capacity to interpret the metaphoric gestures provided by his mother, as she scaffolded the learning of the multimodal elements of scrolling and selecting the text on the phone, is not adequately covered in any of the standards in the curriculum.

Vignette 3

In a journal article, DeVane, Durga and Squire (2010) detail a collaborative, problem-solving gaming session where two 13-year-old boys were learning to play a game, Civilization IV (Civ4). The article shares in-depth detail of this session resulting from video recordings, researcher field notes and game logs. The session is part of a four-year longitudinal study. Data provided in this article explain a problem confronting a player and how he drew upon three strategies to solve the problem of improving the ‘municipal health of their city’ (p. 8), and explain how he collaborates with the other player and an adult facilitator who is an observer. While the article expounds three trends in the problem-solving process, it moves on to discuss how five aspects of systems thinking are mediated through playing Civ4. Of interest in this paper is how the rich data detail three problem-solving processes which demonstrate the enactment of curricular outcomes:

Instead of generating solution paths from general ‘systems thinking’ formalisms, the players’ solutions to problems confronting them in the game system are assembled ‘on the spot’ from their own past game play experiences (in Civ3), individual knowledge of history, and available social and material knowledge resources (a history book, in-game tools and a program facilitator). (DeVane et al., 2010, p. 9)

This example appears to closely link to the Year 7 English Learning Area of interpreting, analysing and evaluating texts. Here the players used ‘comprehension strategies to interpret, analyse and synthesise ideas and information, critiquing ideas and issues from a variety of textual sources’ (Australian Curriculum: English, Year 7, Literacy, Interpreting, analysing, evaluating, ACELY1723). Players of these games are also bringing a range of critical and creative thinking to their interactions with texts and each other and these will support their understanding of problem-solving in the future. The following dialogue identifies how one player is explaining where to find food in the interface to another:
The players are explaining the interface of the text with reference to a much larger context. This is common in middle years schooling where teachers are exploring the textual under story or the themes that develop the readers’ critical awareness of a text. The richness of this problem-solving game links closely to many other curriculum achievement standards, especially as the playing of games like *Civilization III* and *IV* enables players to ‘learn to think with, and within’ (DeVane et al., 2010, p. 5) the game itself. From the *Australian Curriculum: English*, the players were ‘investigating how visual and multimodal texts allude to or draw on other texts or images to enhance and layer meaning’ (*Australian Curriculum: English*, Year 8, Literacy, Interpreting, analysing, evaluating, ACELA1548). The two players tested three different solutions in trying to solve the problems of resourcing their civilisation.

**Vignette 4**
Baron and Ling (2011) explored adolescents’ use of written messaging using online and mobile platforms. The study identified the nature of punctuation, including emoticons, in text messaging. Baron and Ling consulted 75 young people aged between 12 and 18 via focus group interviews. They asked about appropriate punctuation used by males and females, including the ways to end a text. A group of young males claimed that they could tell if girls were flirting with them in their text messages via the punctuation or spelling used:

- Connor: If there’s more than one letter at the end of the word you can tell she’s happy.
- Hunter: They say ‘hey’ with three y’s. And you can tell they’re in a good mood.
- Devin: The winks.
- Several boys: Smiley faces! (Baron & Ling, 2011, p. 54)

In the focus groups comprising young women, the females also believed that boys were flirting with them when boys used emoticons such as a wink face or a smiley face. The questions they asked the students were based on finding out what they believed were appropriate ways to use punctuation when communicating via short message service (SMS).

In a Year 7 classroom, having a discussion about punctuation and accepted conventions used within text messaging may develop aspects of the following codes within the Literacy Strand – Texts in Context, Year 7, ACELY1765 – ‘Analyse and explain the effect of technological innovations on texts, particularly media texts’ and in Year 8, ACELY1729 – ‘Analyse and explain how language has evolved over time and how technology and the media have influenced language use and forms of communication’. This may be a way to ‘hook’ students into sharing an interest in the ways they communicate via mobile telephony and instant messaging.

Class participation could be optimised because the majority of students would have engaged in this form of communication and therefore would be comfortable to contribute to the discussion. Through drawing on their ‘funds of knowledge’, a useful framework that maps what is ‘accepted’ may be a way to develop enthusiasm or, at the least, some content coverage from the Language Content strand, particularly text structure and organisation – ACELA1504 (Year 5), ACELA1518 (Year 6), ACELA1543 (Year 8) and ACELA1556 (Year 9). This sub-strand encapsulates how communication changes both historically and according to what medium has been utilised and how punctuation in particular has been appropriated for different audiences and purposes.
Discussion

There are some interesting opportunities for teachers to explore the informal digital learning environments in partnership with their students. Teachers may benefit just from seeing their students apply their knowledge in different environments and they might be able to identify what new learning might be explored back in the classroom to have further relevance in these informal environments. Teachers might also benefit from seeing how young people are motivated to apply this learning in their out-of-school lives.

We argue that the links between the kinds of learning that happen outside of school and the abstract ideas of the curriculum are a freedom for students to feel more included and in control of their learning pathways. To the best of our knowledge, this kind of work has not been done before; it has been insinuated or inferred. Yet it appears to be an important way to increase connections between school or educational stakeholders and the informal learning, often not recognised or valued or promoted, that goes on outside of schools.

Conclusion

We are excited that the work of teachers might be transformed to accommodate the informal learning that has relevance to students outside of school. We are not suggesting teachers do this just to connect to the funds of knowledge that the students bring to the classroom. Rather, we argue that the core work of teachers could be extended into the community, where the learning from the curriculum is mapped on to the informal practices the students are doing outside the classroom.

It is possible that the core business of teaching might be achieved more effectively if we are aware of, highlight and bring these informal learning practices or funds of knowledge into the classroom and connect to the abstract notions of the curriculum. Enactment of the curriculum might be happening in ways we are currently unaware of. By respecting the ‘other’, as Levinas (1979) suggests, we will be aware of the times and places where the literacy curriculum is being enacted in informal spaces outside of school. This will provide teachers with opportunities to see how students are negotiating the learning from the Australian Curriculum outside of school. We argue that this should be a part of the core business of teachers’ work.

References


Glenn Auld, PhD, is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University. He is working on ethical approaches to new media in schools with Dr Nicola Johnson (Federation University) and Dr Michael Henderson (Monash University)
Nicola F. Johnson, PhD, is a senior lecturer in the School of Education (Gippsland) of the newly established Federation University Australia. She is currently working on a three year research project with Professor Neil Selwyn and Dr Scott Bulfin (Monash University) entitled ‘Making a digital difference? An investigation of new technologies in secondary schools’.