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Chapter 9

Teacher and student agency in contemporary literacy classroom

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We want our students to own their learning – how can you own your learning if you are not responsible for it?

We want our students to be engaged – how can you be engaged if someone else makes all the decisions?

We want our students to know how it feels to make mistakes, be uncomfortable and not be in control – therefore we need to put ourselves in their same situation.

We want our students to take risks and be challenged – fair enough that we do the same!

Lindsay, Year 6/7 teacher
This book has encouraged you to reflect on the tensions and challenges that confront you as a 21st century literacy educator and consider how your professional practice might continually evolve to meet those challenges. One challenge that has always existed, but is becoming more broadly acknowledged, is catering for the diversity of learner needs and interests present in every classroom. The flow of people around the world only intensifies the diversity of student needs and interests that educators feel obliged to address (Rizvi 2009).

Embracing diversity as ‘the new normal’ requires a fine-tuned understanding of students and the development of inclusive pedagogies that are sensitive to the needs of individual students. As mentioned in Chapter 2, authors such as Barbara Comber and Barbara Kamler have developed the notion of ‘turnaround pedagogies’ to describe teacher actions that turn around to students (2005, p. 7). Building on Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff and Norma Gonzalez’s (1992) powerful metaphor of ‘funds of knowledge’ and Pat Thomson’s (2002) notion of the ‘virtual school bag’, we have ourselves been challenged as literacy educators to think differently about our students and the refined and subtle work we need to do in order to enable them to connect with learning.

Becoming a language and literacy educator often involves negotiating the cultures and competing discourses that constitute schooling. This can mean accepting the way things are done at whatever school employs you. Since in all likelihood you will be on a contract, you won’t feel that you are in a position to raise a dissenting view. But your standpoint as a new member of the profession means that you also bring a new pair of eyes to your work, which may enable you to challenge the ‘taken for granted’ embodied in the many forms of compliance that are required of us as educators. This includes standardised testing, educational outcomes that are specified for each year level, prescribed modes of assessment and reporting, and mandated curriculum initiatives, to name a few. These cultures and discourses can often pressure teachers to maintain tight control of student learning, and to value the neat sequential developmental as presented in learning continua, such as outcomes statements, at the expense of appreciating the messiness of students’ growth at different rates and in different directions. It’s also important to appreciate when students surpass teachers’ expectations as they might be formed by prescribed educational outcomes, and the difficulties in keeping pace with their knowledge and expertise in particular areas such as home languages and technological programs, ‘apps’ and other creative capacities.

In our quest to respond to the many pressures of our work in literacy education, there is a danger that we may habitually take up the position of authoritative expert in the classroom, at the expense of allowing ourselves to be co-learners with colleagues and students. However difficult it might be, it’s necessary for us to model a capacity for exploration, improvisation and innovation to our students. How do we ensure that both students and teachers have the capacity to actively engage with...
literacy learning, to make decisions about the nature of this learning, to articulate challenging questions and to seek and share innovative responses? In other words, how can we create learning environments where teachers and students have 'agency' in their classrooms and hopefully embed this capacity to act thoughtfully into their lives beyond schooling?

This chapter suggests some possible answers to these questions, drawing on the experience of Marion, the teacher who has provided us with our epigraph. Although Marion is a very impressive individual, you should still feel free to engage critically in what she has done and to weigh up whether her initiatives would be feasible in the school settings in which you have worked.

**Marion's commitment to student agency**

Let's look back at the blog extract that begins this chapter. Marion is an experienced teacher of thirty years standing and teaches Year 5/6 with two other colleagues. This teaching team has developed a culture of challenging each other as members of a community of learners. In Marion's provocative blog extract, she acknowledges the need to take risks and to model these behaviours to the students. She also poses some challenges to her fellow teachers who regularly engage in these online dialogues about difficult questions. She outlines what she sees as key dimensions of learning: individual responsibility, the capacity to make choices and be accountable for them, the willingness to experiment, to make mistakes, as well as to take risks and seek new challenges. Ultimately, she wants to encourage her colleagues to model these learning attributes, in seeking to extend their own reach as teachers and to demonstrate to students the richness of learning by their own passionate engagement in continuing inquiry.

The qualities that Marion shows might all be seen as aspects of 'agency', which has also been described by Dana Mitra as recognisable in students' increased abilities to articulate opinions, their capacity to take up new identities, and to lead others (Mitra 2004, p. 662). Central to this idea is the linking of agency with the role of change-maker. Teachers who support and promote agency through their classroom literacy practice are very often leaders of change in the way that literacy is taught and understood.

Another way of thinking about this notion of student and teacher inspired change is the notion of 'student voice', a concept that has been present in school reform discourses over several decades. This idea of student participation in school decision-making is more than simply one of expressing opinions, but is directed towards offering students the opportunity to influence change in relation to the design, facilitation and improvement of learning (Mitra 2004).
Dana Mitra distinguishes between basic and sophisticated opportunities for student agency. Basic opportunities invite students to share opinions about potential solutions to problems. Sophisticated opportunities are built on an expectation that students engage in collaborative action with adults to improve teaching, curriculum, assessment and teacher–student relationships, and ultimately student and teacher learning (Mitra 2003). Research points to a wealth of educational benefits when students are genuinely invited to contribute to decisions about their learning. Such benefits include: improved teaching and learning, improved teacher–student relationships, increased student engagement with learning, increased student self-esteem, and a stronger sense of respect and belonging (Fielding 2001; Mitra 2003, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter 2000, 2003).

In the context of the Year 5/6 learning environment which is the focus of this chapter, Marion and her colleagues had already done a lot of work to establish supportive relationships, and they found that the introduction of netbook laptop computers had considerably enhanced the social relations of a learning community that is characterised by student agency. Both teachers and students had been repositioned as change agents, as suggested by Michael Fullan (1993), in their capacities to co-construct innovative pedagogies and practices and reshape learning for their own purposes within this new setting. The Year 5/6 learning environment is a shared space where Marion and her two colleagues work collaboratively with 85 students. The students are divided into three classes, with one member of the teaching team responsible for their own class. However, teaching is shared among the three teachers when all students come together for specific large-group lessons.

Unlike many of the teachers you have met in this book, Marion is very experienced, and she embodies what it means to be a lifelong learner. We visited her teaching space during her 30th year of teaching and participated in an ongoing conversation with her and her two colleagues around their efforts to engage students in taking responsibility for their literacy learning.

A disposition to continually be on the lookout for new challenges was a key dimension of Marion’s educational philosophy and practice, as shown by the quotation from her blog that begins this chapter. This passion for continually ‘raising the bar a little’, to use Marion’s words, was visible throughout her pedagogy, in the activities and assessment tasks she undertook with her students, in her questioning in class and group discussions and in the conversations with colleagues in the Year 5/6 team these activities engendered.

Here we look specifically at how Marion challenged herself to go beyond her previous experiences and her habitual ways of doing things to create the conditions of opportunity that enabled her students to act with more agency in their literacy learning.
We have written about other dimensions of the team's teaching and Marion's leadership elsewhere, about how she set up a netbook program in a school that missed out on Government funding (Cloonan, Hutchison & Paatsch 2014), and how the teaching team engaged eleven and twelve-year old students in analysing and creating poetry (Cloonan, Hutchison & Paatsch 2011).

As you learn more about her teaching, you might like to identify the principles that underpin it, especially with respect to the way she is able to foster a learning community. We focus on three key areas of her work: pedagogy, assessment and planning.

The challenge of 'mindsets'

As teachers, we are well aware of the impact of new literacies on our lives and the lives of our students. We are conscious of the vast potential for engaging students in literacy learning through digital technologies and of the professional challenges involved in learning and thinking about how to productively use the array of devices and modalities available as tools for meaning making (Cloonan, Hutchison & Paatsch 2011, 2014). We know literacies are constantly evolving, and new literacies challenge us to find new ways to harness the knowledge and expertise of teachers and students to promote learning.

The ever expanding new technologies that shape our worlds and our experiences of literacy might be said to be accompanied by what Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2006) describe as two distinct 'mindsets'.

Mindset 1 contends that the world is essentially the same as it has always been, with economic, cultural and social systems operating as they always have, although they are now imbued with an array of sophisticated technologies. Expertise and authority are predominantly found within individuals and institutions. By contrast, Mindset 2 holds that the world is very different because of the ubiquity of digital technologies. Expertise and authority are increasingly distributed and shared. Rather than the stable 'textual order' of Mindset 1, texts now are changing as social relations take place in digital spaces. While these two mindsets may appear to be categorical and may be restrictive, their value lies in offering us a way to reflect on the huge changes that are taking place in literacy education and how we, as literacy educators, respond to these changes.
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A great deal of research into the use of new technologies has argued that literacy teaching in schools needs to connect more strongly to the kinds of digital literacies students engage with in their everyday lives beyond the classroom, in order to productively draw on children’s digital funds of knowledge as a resource for literacy learning (Pahl & Rowsell 2012).

Other researchers suggest that the kinds of conditions present in Mindset 2, such as collaborative learning and knowledge creation among communities of learners are essential preconditions for the possibilities of learning technologies to be fully realised. These researchers emphasise the importance of developing new pedagogies for teaching digital literacies in classrooms to support this shared learning in order to complement individualised learning and achievement. The following description of the elements of new literacy practices summarises the attributes of Mindset 2 and gives a taste of the pedagogical principles we encounter in Marion’s classroom:

...the more a literacy practice privileges participation over publishing, distributed expertise over centralised expertise, collective intelligence over individual possessive intelligence, collaboration over individual authorship, dispersion over scarcity, sharing over ownership, experimentation over ‘normalisation’, innovation and evolution over stability and fidelity, creative-innovative rules breaking over generic purity and policing ... the more we should regard it as a ‘new’ literacy (Lankshear & Knobel 2006, p. 50).

Reflection and discussion

Do you feel that digital technologies have the potential to transform learning within classroom settings? From your knowledge and experience of contemporary classrooms, what do you feel are the necessary preconditions for productively incorporating digital technologies to enhance literacy learning? How might the two ‘mindsets’ that Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel describe help you reflect on the different dispositions of teachers with whom you have worked? How would you characterise your own ‘mindset’?

Putting student agency at the centre of your pedagogy

Let’s now turn to Marion’s pedagogy. In the following account of Marion’s teaching, assessment and planning of a science-based integrated unit, you might find it useful to think about the way that her practice reflects an understanding of literacy teaching as actively promoting student agency in the learning process. You might
specifically explore how Marion provides opportunities for ongoing reflection on students’ learning processes and encourages engagement in self and peer assessment. How does Marion encourage her students to be actively involved in their learning? How does she ensure that the students take responsibility for their own learning throughout the flow of the lessons? How does Marion maintain the students’ focus on the purposes and the processes involved in their construction of new knowledge and understandings?

Earth, space and beyond: challenging literacies

Marion is introducing all the Year 5/6 students to their new fourth term integrated studies unit ‘Earth, Space and Beyond’. This unit of work has been carefully planned by Marion and the two other Year 5/6 teachers. All students gather in a shared learning space for these introductory sessions. In this instance, Marion leads these sessions and begins the discussion by reminding students of the previous work they have completed, reading explanatory texts, asking them to ‘look up the filing cabinet in your brains’ and to talk with a partner about the features and purposes of explanatory texts. Around the room are charts summarising the structure of explanation texts and annotated samples of different kinds of explanations. The students talk animatedly for a couple of minutes and Marion then engages with them in a brief summary discussion of their knowledge of explanation texts. Students offer how such texts typically begin with a question and are often structured by subheadings, describing step-by-step processes. Marion also emphasises the importance of understanding each step in order to follow the text, ‘because otherwise you get lost’. She then moves to the focus of today’s lesson, asking students:

How do we use these texts to gather and use information? What does that mean? What are you expecting to be able to do at the end of this session?

One student, Marnie, answers:

Know how to use strategies to collect, find information and then do something with it

Marion responds that they already know how to do this and what she intends to do in this lesson is ‘to take the bar a little higher and challenge you further. We’re going to look at the concept of synthesis’, meaning the way we continually combine our knowledge and experience to reach a new understanding of the world. She asks whether anyone knows what ‘synthesis’ is, and when it appears that the word and the idea are new to students, she says:
T: We're going to do a demonstration of what it is. What does the sun do?

S: Provides heat, provides light.

T: Think about all the things you know about the sun. What are some of the things you know? What do you think you know? Have vaguely heard from somewhere? Who knows a lot? Who knows a little bit? You know what you know – might be a lot, maybe not much. So, synthesis is bringing together what you know about something and a whole lot of other stuff from what other people know and creating a new version of what you know. Some of this might involve changing your thinking, because something that you actually know is wrong. You might think that the Sun is 100 degrees, when it's actually one million degrees, so you might actually change your thinking when you put together all that you know, with the new things you find out. So synthesis is about putting all the new bits together. Is what you know the same as what you knew 10 years ago? No. So we're always synthesising. Where does the new information come from?

S: Reading factual books, documentaries, parents, talking with experts.

T: You've heard the word synthetic, so there's a connection between these words. Synthesis means a whole lot of different material together. Today we're going to get better at identifying what we already know, using all our reading skills to find out something new.

Marion then gives the students three minutes to form groups and record what they know about the sun. They can choose how to respond: some combine their facts by passing around one netbook and individually adding their notes or nominating a scribe, other groups write in workbooks, while some groups use the software program Audacity to make an audio recording of their conversations. At the end of the three minutes Marion asks the class, ‘Who got off track?’ A few hands go up. She then refocusses on the purpose of the learning and asks the students, ‘What’s the task?’ Several voices respond that the task has been to combine what they know about the sun.

Standing in front of the interactive white board, Marion reiterates to students that they have just identified their schema of what they already know and then, pointing to the screen, which has a YouTube clip ‘Why does the Sun shine’? ready to play, she asks students what their expectations are of this information text and what it is likely to explain. She reminds students that they will need to look and listen carefully, since this text combines visual and sound elements to explain the phenomenon of sunshine. What she doesn’t tell them is that key information is presented in the form of a song, as she wants them to discover for themselves the challenge of internalising this information in this form, and then revisiting it when they engage in another source of information in a later lesson. She plays the first 30 seconds of the clip, before pausing it to ask a series of questions:
M: Is this the sort of explanation text you were expecting?

S: No.

M: So how did you have to change what you did with it to make sense of it? So what did you have to do to understand this as an explanation text?

S: Listen really closely because it was really fast.

M: What else would help you with it?

S: Replaying it, looking at the pictures. Having lyrics to look at.

M: We know it’s a song, what else do you know about songs?

S: Patterns, rhymes.

M: Does that change the way an author conveys the information?

S: Yes.

M: We have to change the way we’re taking information in. I’m going to give you the lyrics and ask you what can we learn about what makes the sun shine from the song. How is what’s in here adding to what I already know. How might it challenge what I already know? [Marion projects the lyrics of the song on the interactive whiteboard.]

Why does the Sun shine?

The Sun is a mass of ‘incandescent’ gas.

A gigantic nuclear furnace.

Where hydrogen is built into helium,

At a temperature of millions of degrees.

M: So the trick is this is to make sure you understand what it means. For example, what does ‘incandescent’ mean? So you need to clarify what the words mean.

Marion tells the students that the task is to add to their knowledge about what makes the sun shine. She asks them to write a paragraph about what they know as a group and how the information in the clip has added or challenged it. She gives each group the set of lyrics, then plays the whole clip through a couple of times. Students then collaboratively write their paragraphs, attempting to synthesise what they already know with the information presented in the YouTube clip. Marion and her two teaching colleagues move around the groups observing, taking notes for their assessment portfolios and taking part in group discussions. Again, groups negotiate the form their response will take: handwritten, typed or recorded. There is animated discussion,
with some students appearing to be experts on the science, others debating and Googleing the veracity of facts quoted by others or relayed in the YouTube clip.

Marion is aware that the science in the clip had been critiqued by scientists for inaccuracies and that another clip is available online from a group of scientists who provide a counter narrative addressing these inaccuracies.

She had contemplated presenting the students with the second account, but felt that this was too much to cover in one lesson, and so she does not discuss this additional dimension with students here. In subsequent lessons that Marion leads, she presents the students with another YouTube clip called ‘The Sun is a miasma of incandescent plasma’, which corrects the facts presented in the previous song.

The students critique both texts drawing on contemporary understandings of scientific knowledge and find the second one has more scientific accuracy. The students go on to complete an open-ended inquiry-based investigation of a contentious topic in space science titled ‘Burning questions’. They are asked to research a question and present their findings, using their choice of multimodal tools.

The notion of challenging all the Year 5/6 students is central for Marion. As we see throughout the lesson, she demands their continual engagement by asking them to identify and articulate their own prior knowledge and connect this explicitly to the focus of this lesson. All students are expected to be actively involved in this exploration. She re-introduces the new concept of ‘synthesis’ and again invites all students to actively participate in an experience of group synthesis of information. Students are given opportunities to articulate the metacognitive dimensions of their learning, as Marion asks them to name the strategies they use to make sense of the YouTube clip as an explanatory text and how these strategies differ between print and digital texts. She also reminds students that information presented in texts is not neutral and prompts them to maintain their critical stance in considering how the new information presented in the video might challenge their current understandings. In asking students to develop a group response about what they now know about the science of why the sun shines, she offers yet another opportunity for students to reflect on, articulate, debate and co-construct a response that draws on multiple sources of information. Knowledge is viewed as mutable, evolving, and collectively arrived at through research and dialogue.

Similarly, in the design of the ‘Burning questions’ inquiry learning task, Marion challenges the students to identify a big question about space that matters to them personally – literally a burning question. As Hannah expresses it, ‘We listed some and then chose one that was what we really wanted to find out’. Initially, the students are encouraged to pose as many questions as they like about space in an unlimited brainstorm. They have so many questions that it is impossible to answer them all, and so they discuss what constitutes significant and answerable questions. The students
then break into their smaller class groups and are asked to negotiate individually with their own class teachers about a final selection.

During these individual class sessions, Marion and the other two Year 5/6 teachers challenge the students to refine their questions, so that their answers can contribute to a deeper collective understanding of the various space-related phenomena identified by the students as significant and interesting. The students then research the answers and frame their explanations as a sequence or a process, using precise technical language.

Reflection and discussion

You might like to re-read the above account of Marion’s introductory lessons and identify the teaching and learning strategies that she has employed. You will note that, like all experienced teachers, she deftly moves from whole class discussion (involving a significant amount of input from her) to small-group work. Yet the whole-group session is also very interactive, involving constant negotiation between her and the students as they take up the word ‘synthesis’ and try to apply it in their examples to share their knowledge about the Sun and to extend it in significant ways. How is Marion able to use classroom talk as a vehicle for promoting a sense of student agency?

Let’s now reflect further on the principles of literacy teaching and learning evident in Marion’s practice throughout the integrated studies unit ‘Earth, Space and Beyond’, specifically with a view to the way she encourages student agency. Another cornerstone of Marion’s pedagogy is the notion of ‘choice’. Students are expected to exercise choice with respect to the people with whom they work, in the focus of their research investigations into a ‘Burning question’ they negotiate with teachers, in their selection of print and multimodal tools to document and share their learning, and in the range of resources they draw on. For example, Marion and the other Year 5/6 teachers have developed a series of masterclasses around key stages of the inquiry: framing answerable questions, writing explanatory texts, sequencing information and making meaning through visual grammar.

As part of these series of classes, students are invited to sign up for a master class of their choice. These classes provide the opportunity for students to consolidate their skills or to develop new ones. There are negotiables and non-negotiables, with some essential components and others that are optional to allow for individual preferences and passions. For example, all students are expected to include visuals in their responses. They are required to create original illustrations for their presentation, with no images copied from the Internet permitted. Students make original illustrations using a variety of media, digital, photographic and drawing tools, and use Photostory, PowerPoint and Digital Stories to present their findings.

The students then present their information to their teachers and peers. Students are evaluated on their presentations, using a rubric that was co-constructed between
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the students and their teachers. During the development of this rubric, students were, once again, given a voice regarding content to include. There were many choices that the students made regarding how they would evaluate content, and how they would ensure consistency and clarity with the assessment, including explicit indicators for how the scientific information was communicated to answer their burning questions. These co-constructed rubrics and the process of self and peer evaluation are routinised assessment practices in these Year 5/6 classrooms and, according to the teachers, result in increased student accountability and more sophisticated responses.

Figure 9.1 is an example of the text that one student, Lisa, created and presented. In this example she used PowerPoint. You might like to consider her burning question

How did the moon form?

![Image of the moon and its phases]

The creation of the moon is quite interesting. It was created from the Earth's magma. It has four theories of how it was formed. One theory is that the moon was formed from a meteor that hit the Earth and created the moon. Another theory is that the Earth and the moon were once a single planet, but due to a gravitational force they separated. Yet another theory is that the moon formed from the Earth's magma. Each theory provides a different explanation for the moon's formation.

The moon is now in orbit around the Earth. It moves around the Earth in a cycle called the moon's phases. The moon's phases are determined by the amount of sunlight that is reflected onto the moon's surface. As the moon moves through its phases, the amount of sunlight reflected changes, resulting in different appearances of the moon.

The moon is an important feature of our planet. It helps regulate the Earth's climate by reflecting sunlight and providing a reflection of the sky. The moon also plays a role in the tides, which are the rise and fall of ocean levels caused by the gravitational pull of the moon.

Fig. 9.1: How did the Moon form? (<http://wiki.answers.com/How_did_the_moon_form>)
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and how she answers it. What text types does she use to answer her question? How does the use of images support meaning in the text? Can you see any traces of the kinds of literacy pedagogies Lisa’s teachers provide students in her PowerPoint presentation on her burning question: ‘How did the Moon form?’

You have now seen how Marion attempts to build in a sense of student agency into the way she delivers her lessons. For Marion, student agency is integral to effective language and literacy teaching. She expects her students to actively engage in both whole-class and small-group discussion, putting their ideas into words as they engage with one another in a joint exploration of a topic that interests them. She then gives them considerable choice with respect to the way they synthesise their information and present it to others. It is also crucial that they have a sense of the importance of presenting their work to their peers, and not just to their teachers. Everything is directed towards generating knowledge that people own and which they wish to share with others. In the following sections of this chapter, the emphasis shifts slightly, as we detail Marion’s efforts to engage her students in even more complex decision-making relating to the planning of their curriculum.

Further developing student agency: school planning for literacy learning

Since the introduction of the one-to-one netbook program in the Year 5/6 classes, Marion and her colleagues continually observed changes to the learning environment. While they had always thought to actively encourage collaboration and sharing, the technology prompted them to reflect on further opportunities for students to collaborate, share ideas, reflect on their learning and take greater responsibility for their own and their peers’ learning. The teachers noted there was greater student agency, including: the need for increased accountability (e.g. the need to follow cyber-safety protocols), increased problem solving, independence, organisation and responsibility, increased student-to-student collaboration (e.g. peer reviewing and group work) and teacher to student collaboration (e.g. student-initiated forms of multi-modal representation).

Constantly reflecting on how to increase student agency, Marion was at home one night, writing mid-year reports on each student’s achievements, when an idea came to her. She wrote a blog post entitled, ‘Too much chocolate’ in which she reflected on the changes she and her colleagues had made to their literacy pedagogies since the introduction of the one-to-one netbook program, particularly the impact of the netbooks on the social relations between the teaching team and the students.

As Marion thought about the teachers’ imminent student-free planning day for term two big questions occurred to her: Why are we teachers doing the planning? Why aren’t we asking the students what they think we should be learning?
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She sent an email to her colleagues suggesting that they invite students to be involved and asking what they thought. Her colleagues were in agreement. So in the last week of term when the teachers in each area of the school are released for a day to plan together (and the students usually have a day off school), Marion and the Year 5/6 teaching team decided to work with their students to plan the term three curriculum program.

There were many uncertainties around this unprecedented approach to planning at their school. As Marion wrote in her blog (you will see that it is from this text that we have taken the epigraph for this chapter):

How many students will choose to be involved? We don’t know yet.

What will it look like? We are not sure yet.

How will it go? We have no idea.

What we do know:

- We want our students to own their learning – how can you own your learning if you are not responsible for it?
- We want our students to be engaged – how can you be engaged if someone else makes all the decisions?
- We want our students to know how it feels to make mistakes, be uncomfortable and not be in control – therefore we need to put ourselves in the same situation.
- We want our students to take risks and be challenged – fair enough that we do the same!

Approximately half of the students responded to their invitation to participate in the planning day for the three Year 5/6 classes. The teachers decided to contain the students’ input to two areas in the first instance: English (with a focus on writing) and their Integrated Studies topic of ‘The Environment’. They gave students access to the English curriculum documents and the school’s two-year Integrated Studies planner. On one-to-one laptops and large projectors, they used the microblogging software program Today’s Meet to share and record their planning ideas. Planning began with a question to the students, “what kind of English and Environmental studies learning would you like to be involved in next term?” Examples of the students’ blog responses (comments followed by nicknames) can be seen below, interspersed with comments from one of the teachers in Marion’s team, ‘Mr M’.

Mr M: What kind of English and Environmental work would help you learn?

Mr M: There’s no Interschool sport, camp or excursions in Term 3.

Mite: People have to enjoy the work that we do in Term 3.

Jans: More activities to do with nature
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Joey: Hands-on work or going outside.
Mite: Some work is in groups and by yourself to get a fair share.
Nessie: Having more excursions to learn.
Tara: More hands-on work (Art and constructing).
Maybe we can choose our favourite travel places and do a project on it.
Mr M: I'm sure we could think of some local area excursions.
Jams: By activities I mean, having our own plant to look after for a certain amount of time. (Inside the school grounds!)
Nessie: Making a topic enjoyable.
Larb: You have to think about are the students going to enjoy the work.
Kat: Work that challenges us.
Elec: More projects that you get to choose your topic.
Tara: More passion projects.
Mite: Yeah because we can write something that we want to write about.
Calk: Find a way of getting confidence levels up.
Joey: Big group task.
Tara: Creative writing tasks.
Bush: Getting to choose if you want to work in a group or independently.
Tara: We could gain confidence levels by doing drama activities and speaking in front of a large group.
Mite: Doing something that the teachers have never done before.
Vanessa: No hard work.
Xang: Finding more about my computer program.
Zald: More challenge.
Calk: Thinking of doing creative work.
Melm: What kind of challenges?
Vanessa: Challenging work but not really hard.
Zald: More risk.
Xang: Use more of my computer programs for writing.
Mite: YES YES YES.
Calk: Pushing us all to our own limits.
Marion did not participate in this discussion. Instead she read the students' responses as they appeared on the screen. She looked for patterns and tried to deeply engage with the students' suggestions. Discussions were also saved in portable document format (pdf) so that teachers could revisit the students' responses. Teachers tried not to intervene too quickly, allowing students to interact with one another and explore ideas.

The students emphasised the importance of providing choices within learning tasks and options for different working styles. They explored the notion of challenge and agreed that one student's challenge is not necessarily another's. Students wanted support to build knowledge but also wanted teachers to recognise that they like to do this in different ways (for example, some want instruction, others like to explore for themselves).

The students' use of language mirrors Marion's, reflecting her expectations and giving evidence of the transfer of responsibility for learning. The language is reflective of pedagogical principles that they found useful, including 'challenge', 'text creation' and 'choice'. Such principles are congruent with Dana Mitra's (2004) notion of sophisticated opportunities for student agency whereby the students were being offered the opportunity to influence change in relation to the planning and improvement of their own learning.

For Marion, the value of using microblogging to give students opportunities to contribute to discussions and give a voice to all students was confirmed. The Year 5/6 teachers used the blog throughout the planning day to generate a focus for their Environmental studies, to engage students with the expectations of English curriculum documents for writing, to consider the students' desires and needs for learning in writing and in Environmental Studies, and to co-generate ideas as to how learning will be organised in the coming term.

A major idea that was collaboratively generated was the planning of a Term 3 'writer's festival of comedy, film and story'. This grew from the students' desires for, 'people...to enjoy the work that we do in Term 3', designing 'a big group task' and 'creative writing tasks', while increasing choice including 'getting to choose if you want to work in a group or independently'. It also incorporated the suggestion to 'gain confidence levels by doing drama activities and speaking in front of a large group', and 'doing something that the teachers have never done before'. Elements of choice catered for the request for 'challenging work but not really hard'. As presentations would be multimodal, there would be opportunities to 'use more... computer programs for writing'.

Students took the opportunity to reflect, and give feedback and suggestions on a range of practices, as well as their participation in curriculum planning. A heated debate on homework was noted without an immediate solution. Comments like 'the people that don't do homework shouldn't get consequences because missing out on the things that we do and learn sort of is a consequence' were
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acknowledged by the teachers and students but not resolved. As Marion explained at the end of the day,

The planning is messy, the documentation is not formalised, but the ideas and understanding of where we are heading is clear.

This was a challenge for Marion, an experienced, organised and highly accomplished lead teacher. As she reflected:

I am a control freak, I used to spend hours planning lessons that ‘hit the mark’, achieved my purpose, delivered content in exciting, interesting ways, that engaged my students. Now I spend hours learning, exploring and working out how to give that control back to the students and still know where they are at with their learning, where they need to go next and what I can provide to support them.

Reflection and discussion

What do you think about Marion’s efforts to involve students in planning for literacy learning? What opportunities have there been for student agency in the teaching contexts in which you have worked? How Marion’s ideas resonate with your experiences as a literacy teacher? How do teachers navigate between negotiating curriculum with students and delivering a prescribed curriculum, such as that set out in statements about the outcomes that students should achieve at each level of schooling?

Further to Marion’s acknowledgement of her need to relinquish her control of the planning for student learning, she also acknowledges the importance of embracing students’ strengths within their learning community. Recognition of these strengths, particularly in relation to students’ knowledge and expertise in using technologies, may often challenge teachers to appreciate when students surpass their own level of knowledge. As Marion reflects, this may also mean a further relinquishment of control and the need to develop trust:

I think teachers have to let go of the fact that they’ve got to control these IT worlds, cause they won’t and you’ve just got to... sure you’ve got to put lots of protocols and usage conduct in place. But I think with that you sort of say okay, we’re going to trust you and you say, well, teach us how. You know this. You know that. When this is happening... I’m always saying it to everyone, help me now. Not only to my colleagues but the students I teach. And I think actually they get a lot out of that because for some kids that’s their big strength...
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The change in the locus of control for responsibility for learning remains a challenge for Marion. While admitting to such anxieties, Marion sees literacy as a sociocultural practice (Street 1995) and, with meaning-making increasingly occurring in digital contexts, she engages her students in both print and digital worlds. For Marion, as a literacy teacher, the shift from page to screen as proposed by Ilana Snyder (1998) is impacting on the types of texts she engages students with and the ways in which she engages students in text analysis and creation. A major aspect of the shift is social. In line with 'Mindset 2' (Lankshear & Knobel 2006) she is attending to changing power relations, embedding expectations of student responsibility across her pedagogical, assessment and curriculum design.

She displays a teacher-as-researcher mindset, continually curious about learning and students, and models a learning persona, articulating and reflecting on her own and others' learning in an ongoing way – the uncertainties and not so successful efforts as well as the triumphs and breakthroughs. Her reflections on what it means to plan for learning challenge outcomes-based education, with its predetermined descriptions of what students will learn and in what sequence this will happen. Rather than prescribed outcomes, she now emphasises the importance of teachers and students engaging in a joint inquiry into things that they wish to know.

I have had to do some deep thinking about what does it mean to plan with the 'end in mind'. The end for me had usually been some predetermined task and/or creation that every student worked towards achieving. I hope for my future students' sake I never fall into that trap again. The end has become... what we (students and teachers) want to know and do and we should decide together how to get there.

Marion’s questioning orientation towards her own work shows that teacher professional learning, like student learning, is as an ongoing concern, evidenced in collaborative dialogue that reflects ongoing curiosity about learners and learning. It is a model for her students and colleagues. It allows for the messiness and false starts and dead-ends of learning. It rejects a step-by-step, uniform approach. As Marion remarks:

Asking students how they want to learn, expecting them to be responsible for that, setting goals and success criteria together has led to many successes and some failures... Our most powerful learning is coming from the failures and the endless questions we are asking ourselves. How do we support all students to be independent in their learning? Does it take longer for some students to take on responsibility for their learning, their failures and successes? Do we allow students enough time to succeed before we step in? How do we measure success? How do we maintain accountability? How do we cover the curriculum? What is essential learning?

At its foundation is honest collaboration, built on trust and free exchange of opinions.
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Reflection and discussion

Reflect on your own learning and the learning experiences of your students or students you have observed and worked with. How would you judge the importance of agency for language and learning? What other dimensions do you consider to be important for rich forms of language and learning to occur?

How do you, as a teacher and researcher, continue to challenge yourself to go beyond your own experiences and to foster learning communities that provide opportunities for student agency?

Conclusion

This account of one extended learning community of students, teachers and researchers has explored how a group of teachers and students, led by one very experienced teacher, endeavoured to engage students in taking responsibility for their own learning. We have witnessed how teachers challenged themselves and their students to act with greater agency. Students and teachers participated in a shared learning environment that encouraged risk-taking, collaboration, peer review, group work, and experimentation.

Marion and her colleague’s ongoing reflections on teacher and student new literacy practices prompted them to explore affordances made possible by this technologically sophisticated learning environment. Students were expected to actively engage with all stages of the learning process and communicate their new understandings using innovative modes of presentation. This engagement with multiple forms of communication within the learning community led to changes in teacher-student relationships towards more collaborative, egalitarian and trusting relationships. Teachers and students demonstrated their willingness to share doubt and uncertainty in this ever-changing, fluid learning environment, and together opened up the possibility for developing innovative solutions and sophisticated opportunities for learning.

References


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