Introduction

We need to examine what literacy activities our students are engaging with out of school and consider how we can form bridges to support them within school. This will give us the opportunity to think more clearly about what literacy is being supported where. In addition, we need to pay attention to the complex blend of new and old media, which are central to the experience of the everyday cultures of childhood and adolescence. (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, pp. 71–72)

Pahl and Rowsell (2005) were not directly referring to homework in the above quotation but their ideas resonate with teachers who see homework as more than a task. In this article we will explore two sites of ‘homework’ to identify how literacy is experienced within home and community spaces. We will also refer to diverse social contexts where homework and multimodal literacies are mediated by a variety of knowledgeable others, by texts and social practices, in languages familiar to the student at home. While the curriculum is fast becoming standardised, the lived experience of ‘homework’ and multiliteracies from the vignettes below reveal a different story of diversity and negotiation that is highly contextualised by places, people and practices.

Vignette 1 – Beyond homework: Community-based literacy spaces

Teachers and parents often view homework as an individual responsibility, regarding it as an important way to develop independent learning skills. Increasingly however, schools are recognising their responsibility for scaffolding homework practices, providing after-school support for children to get their homework done. Community organisations also offer homework centres for students whose homes may not be conducive to successful completion of homework.

The Brick Street Learning Space is located in an inner-city warehouse in Melbourne and serves as a community education hub for a multi-ethnic, socio-culturally diverse population, which includes refugees from Afghanistan and most recently, the Sudan. It offers a free after-school program for young people to work with volunteer tutors and mentors to do homework and creative arts projects, such as music recording and performances, visual arts, filmmaking and photography. A group of regular Year 8 students, Tahir, Amir, Leo, Senai and Declan, sit around a table working on Maths and SoSE homework. Amir, a highly competent, focused student confidently occupies the role of Maths tutor, moving around the table, answering questions and reassuring his friends as they check their understanding. First, he demonstrates to Tahir with a calculator how to move through a stage he’s stuck on. He then explains to Leo, who’s uncertain what the question is asking, that he has to find out the length of one side of the triangle. Amir then looks over Declan’s shoulder and assures him that he has the correct answer.

Senai has two political newspaper articles on the table which she has to analyse. She works on them for 10 minutes before announcing how boring the work is. She moves to a computer and begins to research an essay on the life and work of Andy Warhol. Using Google, she types in ‘Where was Andy Warhol born?’ then pastes the required information into her essay, editing until it becomes ‘her own words’. The co-ordinator, who has been moving between other students working on the computers, delivers two books about Warhol’s art and they briefly discuss the images on the covers, although Senai doesn’t open the books. While she is writing her essay, Senai texts her friends and listens to music from her iPhone. Other friends drop in to remind her about dance practice, but she stays until she has finished the homework due the following day. Amir joins Senai and others on the computers, delivers two books about Warhol’s art and they briefly discuss the images on the covers, although Senai doesn’t open the books. While she is writing her essay, Senai texts her friends and listens to music from her iPhone. Other friends drop in to remind her about dance practice, but she stays until she has finished the homework due the following day. Amir joins Senai and others on the computers and begins playing an online game, while listening to sound files for use in his radio show, a group English assignment where students have to record interviews and play live or sampled music on the school radio station. As the other boys finish their Maths, they also join Amir and Senai at the computers, moving between game playing and developing their radio shows.
All the students at the Brick Street Learning Space are ‘doing homework’, but their ways of approaching the tasks are diverse, as are the meanings various students ascribe to homework. We can see different learning behaviours: individual, group, accompanied by music, multitasking, exploring, playing. The opportunity for collaboration between students as they do their homework together is one of the attractions of the centre. Tahir, Amir, Leo and Declan draw on each other’s knowledge and expertise to complete their homework. Amir, scaffolds the learning of his peers, circulating around the group, answering questions, modelling and reassuring, just as a teacher, tutor or perhaps a parent would. By contrast, for Senai, homework tasks hold little interest and she moves through them independently, as quickly and efficiently as possible, albeit willing to accept the help of the co-ordinator in finding resources for her essay. The students involved are using the centre for their own purposes, as well as for doing homework and the centre invites this diversity of uses. Many other types of teaching and learning occur in this space beyond those typically associated with the traditional notion of ‘homework’.

At the Learning Space, homework becomes a collective, shared endeavour rather than an individualised, solo effort. There is the possibility of enjoying the company of friends, intellectual and emotional support for learning and access to expert assistance and technological resources that may not be readily available in student homes. Each experience of doing homework, whether at home alone at a computer or at the kitchen table while dinner is being prepared, or at an after school program with friends and other adults, reflects the possibilities of spatialised literacies. In the Brick Street Learning Space, students are free to collaborate in learning, teaching and creating with their peers and with mentors. They move easily between school-ordained literacy tasks and their own interests, accessing music, and engaging with friends for their own pleasure. This is a ‘passionate affinity space’ (Gee & Hayes, 2011) where everyone can create and everyone can mentor and teach and also be mentored and taught. The boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘play’ merge as students freely access the available technological and human resources and use them for their own, unique purposes.

Vignette 2 – The plurality of community literacies
Rachel Thomas and her family are members of the Kunibidji community, in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Rachel is one of the 250 people in the world who prefer to speak Ndjébbana as their first language. A visit to Rachel’s house reveals the complex and engaging ways literacy is practised and valued by children on new media in everyday contexts at home.

Taris, Rachel’s son is learning how to download a song from the Internet on Rachel’s phone. While Taris and Rachel can hear singing and wailing in another language from the funeral across the road, he focuses on how to download a song by Michael Jackson. To do this, he must follow instructions by Rachel in Ndjébbana, read the screen in English and press the right buttons on the phone and click the right icons in the screen on the website that is selling the song.

Here is some dialogue around the phone with the English translation:

Rachel: Barra-náná Djèbba (Look that one)
Rachel: Number 6 Barrakanana (Look at the number 6 one)
Taris: Busy
Rachel: Ma (Yes)
Rachel: Djàwardaya, Djàwardaya (Up, Up)
Taris: Djìya? (This one?)
Rachel: Djàwardaya this side (Go up this side)
Rachel: Djàwardaya, djì-yarra (Go up that way)
Rachel: Komá, djé-yábbá (No not that way)
Rachel: Yaka-ngádja djàwardaya (Close that one, go up)
Rachel: One more djàwardaya Go up one more time) Taris: Djàya? (This one?)
Rachel: Yaka-ngádja arrow (Go where the arrow is pointing)
Rachel: Komá djé-yábbá (Not that way)
Rachel: Djiya dijya arrow dawardaya (That one that one put the arrow up there) (Taris pressed another button)
Rachel: Rub off djamabera (Rub it off you made a mistake)
Taris: Agh ngawónkka ngawókka ba-kkìndju (Agh I will go back, I will go back one more)

While this is not homework set by a classroom teacher, the dialogue highlights how learning at home for Taris is mediated by his first language, mobile technologies, websites with valued resources and co-constructed knowledge from his family. Taris is highly motivated for doing this work in literacy that blends languages, modes and identities because he is getting something for becoming literate.

Some ideas to consider when designing home literacy learning experiences
Here are some ideas that you might want to consider when designing literacy learning to involve parents and students in meaningful and purposeful ways:

- Challenge unidirectional knowledge production: don’t just expect knowledge to flow from the
textbook or worksheet to the student. Think about how knowledge is co-constructed in the out-of-school spaces where homework is completed.

- Focus on process as well as product: consider the diverse ways homework has been mediated by people and spaces. The students’ textual response will be influenced by the resources they have available to them with reference to languages, multimodal practices, parents and caregivers and digital devices.

- Respect the funds of knowledge available to the students: home tasks might be designed as open-ended conversations where the students are encouraged to explore, question and demonstrate their understandings in ways that draw on their home and community knowledge and resources to complete the homework.

- Use home tasks as an invitation to build community partnerships: homework can open up spaces to soften the walls to connect home and school literacies.

References

Glenn Auld is a senior lecturer at Deakin University, teaching and researching in the areas of language and literacy. He is currently working with community elders to explore how the out-of-school literacy practices of Kunibidji children in Arnhem Land map onto the Australian National Curriculum. They are finding some interesting gaps in the curriculum. Email: glenn.auld@deakin.edu.au

Kirsten Hutchison is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacy at Deakin University and teaches in undergraduate and postgraduate programs, with a focus on early and middle years literacy, digital and community literacies. Her research and teaching interests are centred around literacy and the nexus between education and social justice. Email: kirsten.hutchison@deakin.edu.au