

2020

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Recommended Citation

Auld, G., Eysers, A., & O'Mara, J. (2020). Assessment of Literacy Pedagogy using Gratitude. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(6).

Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol45/iss6/4>

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Assessing Pre-Service Teachers' Literacy Pedagogy through Gratitude Notes to Secondary Students

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Abstract: This paper considers aspects of a course redesign that focuses on motivating Pre-service Teachers to engage in negotiating relevant literacy teaching pedagogies in their discipline. The purpose of this article is to describe how we approached the teaching of literacy with Pre-service Teachers, in ways that valued the Pre-service Teachers' relationships with secondary students using notes of gratitude. These notes provided the Pre-service Teachers with an opportunity to communicate in plain language to the students what they learnt from them about literacy pedagogy. The shift from the focus on the subject matter of literacy to the enactment of literacy teaching and learning through valued pre-service teacher and student relationships shifted the tenor of the course. Our conclusion emphasises how this innovation in assessment enabled us to emphasise the importance of relationality in teaching and to uphold ideals of social inclusion of school students and the professional growth of Pre-service Teachers.

Introduction

Literacy across the Curriculum is a compulsory literacy unit for all secondary pre-service teaching students in our BA/B Teach course. Over the years we have found that our secondary PSTs are usually very discipline focused in their orientation. When we have been involved in the selection process into our teaching courses, for instance, we have been struck by the difference between primary applications, which tend to emphasise the applicant's interest in supporting children, and the focus on an identity around disciplinarity in the secondary applications. In this literacy unit, many of the PSTs begin the unit resentful of its existence, assuming that teaching literacy is not part of the secondary subject they will be teaching, and, in some cases, the belief that there is no literacy in their subject area, so *Literacy across the Curriculum* is therefore irrelevant to them. What binds the cohort across these disciplines is a desire by the PSTs to build relationships with students and make a difference.

This paper considers aspects of a course redesign that focuses on motivating PSTs to engage in negotiating relevant literacy teaching pedagogies in their discipline. Over the past several years, to increase the motivation and relevance of the unit, we have embedded the classes in two secondary schools. Over an embedded nine-week school teaching experience, the PSTs work with a student on their literacy skills in the classroom context where the mentor teacher welcomes PST/ secondary student relationships. This course design placed our undergraduate secondary PSTs in relationships with students where they could practise

their literacy pedagogy. At the end of the unit, the second assessment task is for the PSTs to prepare and present a gratitude note to the secondary student with whom they worked.

The purpose of this article is to describe how we approached the teaching of literacy with PSTs, in ways that valued the PSTs' relationships with students using notes of gratitude. We found that the PSTs' literacy pedagogy can be assessed while developing relationships with students through the gifting of gratitude notes. These notes provided the PSTs with an opportunity to communicate in plain language to the secondary students what they learnt from them about literacy pedagogy. In classes, the PSTs discussed how they valued the relationships they formed with the secondary students. The shift from the focus on the subject matter of literacy to the enactment of literacy teaching and learning through valued pre-service teacher and student relationships shifted the tenor of the course, while enabling us to also demonstrate the importance of relationships in teaching, the expression of gratitude, and the importance of literacy across the curriculum areas. Our conclusion emphasises how this innovation in assessment enabled us to emphasise the importance of relationality in teaching and to uphold ideals of social inclusion of school students and the professional growth of PSTs.

Conceptual Framework

This paper uses a conceptual framework of pedagogy with three interrelated elements of belief, design, and action. We build on work by Gale, Mills, and Cross (2017), who articulate pedagogic work for social inclusion based on a belief that all students bring value to the learning environment, 'a design that values difference while also providing access to and enabling engagement with dominance, and actions that work with students and their communities' (p.3).

While the conceptual framework was designed to foreground the links between teachers' pedagogy and social inclusion, we are using the framework to explore the literacy pedagogy of PSTs. The social inclusion endpoints of the framework are highly relevant to the work of PSTs, particularly as they teach literacy from sociocultural perspectives that can include the strengths students bring to the classroom. Gale et al. (2017) draw on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), making reference to pedagogic work. In this frame, pedagogic work is described as:

'a prolonged process of inculcation producing internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary in the form of a durable, transposable habitus, capable of generating practices conforming with those principles outside of and beyond any express regulation or any explicit reminding of the rule' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 36).

Literacy learning is a site of both explicit teaching of rules and implicit understandings of how texts function according to the context. Gratitude notes can be bounded by both explicit and implicit aspects of the cultural practices of meaning making. Gratitude notes seem like a suitable medium to mediate these understandings.

In the context of teacher education, our pedagogic work attempts to provide PSTs with the tools to name and negotiate discourses and processes that manifest in the pedagogic work in schools. By redesigning the assessment tasks, using gratitude notes to students, the unit enables the PSTs to negotiate alternative narratives of assessment, and fosters the development of their confidence to speak back against narrow-focused forms of assessment.

The taken for granted practices of assessment of PSTs as a cognitive practice devoid of the relational intent of teaching is a practice we are attempting to disrupt, while having a primary focus of assessing the literacy pedagogy of the PSTs. This work attempts to disrupt

what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have outlined as the taken for granted practice in schools, where students from marginal backgrounds find it very difficult to succeed. In designing the assessment items for the PSTs, we considered what practices were taken for granted. In designing the assignment, we were also trying to shift the literacy pedagogical practices of the PSTs and disrupt their ideas of everyday practice through the construction of the thankyou notes. Gale et al.'s (2017) framework is underpinned by the tenets of social inclusion. When teachers use this framework, they uphold socially inclusive pedagogic work.

Literature Review (our beliefs)

Our beliefs about what counts in assessing PSTs' literacy pedagogy are informed by understandings of literacy pedagogy and assessment in higher education. These beliefs, informed by the literature, are a construct of our pedagogical work as teacher educators and provide a justification for exploring the possibilities of gratitude in an assessment task in a unit on literacy pedagogy with PSTs.

Relationships in Teaching

The importance of relationships in the social sciences and teaching has been well documented. Baumeister and Leary (1995) posit that relatedness is a powerful motivator for all that humans do. The existence of a positive relationship between a teacher and a student is an important factor in successful student learning. Comber and Kamler (2004) argue that teachers should have a strong understanding of the students' life-worlds to connect to their learning to disrupt deficit discourses in teaching. A powerful concept of this study concerns the merits of small gifts for students created by PSTs. The possibility of developing the agency of PSTs while simultaneously developing relationships with school students aligns with our beliefs about the importance of a sociocultural approach to literacy pedagogy as teacher educators. The social approach to literacy where relationships are valued is outlined below.

Literacy as Social Practice

A sociocultural approach to literacy highlights the importance of social practices in literacy where relationships between people are an integral part of meaning making. Our beliefs about literacy as social practice stem from the importance of relationships to education. The ground-breaking work of Heath (1983) marked a social turn in literacy pedagogy where the out-of-school social practices of the students and the relationships between learners and caregivers were shown to impact on their literacy learning at school. The concept of literacy as a social practice was further explored by Barton and Hamilton (1998) who argue that literacy is best understood as a set of social practices mediated by texts. Lankshear and Knobel (2011) define literacies as 'socially recognised ways in which people generate, communicate, and negotiate meanings as members of Discourse through the medium of encoded texts' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011, p. 46). In this context, encoded texts are those which use a system of signs and symbols that can travel across time and space with an agreed shared meaning. The assessment included both words and images. The inclusion of the graphics intends to enhance the students' desires to engage in visual texts (Leander & Boldt, 2018) and is further justified in the gratitude notes as the PSTs will need to engage

students in their future teaching using hybridised texts that extend the students' learning. Lankshear and Knobel's definition of literacy provides two things. Firstly, it provides a way of understanding the gratitude notes as encoding an ephemeral moment or transaction between the PST and the secondary student that has a particular meaning to the PST learning about literacy pedagogy. Secondly, it positions both the PST and the secondary student as members of this discourse founded in gratitude.

Literacy Pedagogy as a Gift

Our framing of literacy pedagogy as a gift is central to our belief about the possibilities of learning exchange. According to Bourdieu (1990), gifts become more powerful when they are spontaneous and outside the mechanism of a ritual. Our work as teacher educators described in this paper—using gratitude notes to students from PSTs—sits outside normal teacher-student exchanges, which become ritualised in literacy pedagogy. Luke (2008) provides a justification for this pedagogical work by combining the ideas of literacy as social practice and gifting to arrive at a construct of literacy pedagogy as a gift. Literacy pedagogy can be dialogical in nature, drawing on democratic pedagogies, process and rhetorical approaches to the teaching of writing, and the use of reciprocal teaching and intercultural models (Luke, 2008). We believe that gratitude notes can simultaneously recount the shared experiences the PST had with the student while mediating what it is to become a teacher of literacy. We also hope that the gratitude notes produced by the PSTs show what they learned about the teaching of literacy skills from the secondary student.

Using Gratitude Notes for Assessment Purposes

In higher education, assessment serves many purposes, including certifying learning, guiding students through tasks that support learning, and developing university students' understandings of quality (Boud, 2000). For students who have been schooled in neo-liberalist settings, assessment informs them what the university, discipline and profession value. For these students, assessment defines what the 'actual curriculum' (Ramsden, 1992) is; as they believe that what is not assessed is not valuable. However, although relationships are important to pre-service teacher education, there is limited research on authentic tasks that actually assess PSTs for teacher-student relationship abilities. The purpose of the article is to justify how we approached the teaching of literacy with PSTs, in ways that valued the PSTs' relationships with students using notes of gratitude.

Work published under the banner of relationality, such as Ramsden's (1987) 'relational perspective' represents, a body of work concerned with relationships between content, skills and student learning. Pijanowski (2004) states that education can simultaneously focus on skills, critical thinking and relationships between learners. In addition, some research has explored relationships as a means to enable better assessment practices, such as Carless' (2013) work on trusting relationships in feedback, and Ajjawi and Boud's (2015) work on studying relationships in feedback dialogues. Although we share the perspective that positive relationships can enable good assessment practices, our work is focused on literacy pedagogy as an assessment, making gratitude the enabler of assessment. Through the use of gratitude notes, this paper documents the first case study we are aware of that explores an assessment task for PSTs designed to privilege a relationship between PSTs and school students. We believe this textually mediated relationship between pre-service teacher and student is an important extension of assessing PSTs' literacy pedagogy.

Methodology (our design)

In the conceptual framework proposed by Gale et al. (2017), the pedagogical work, and its possibilities for social inclusion is based on a coursework framework that models ‘socially inclusive spaces that engage with the diversity and difference our student teachers bring to their professional preparation and learning’ (p. 8). This has been a central part of our redesign of *Literacy Across the Curriculum*, in shifting it to a school-based unit where the PSTs are working with secondary students. The act of doing this enabled PSTs of all disciplines, with their differential habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), to imagine themselves as teachers of literacy. In the following section we will explore the coursework design for the PSTs, along with our methodology for this research. We will provide a background to the literacy pedagogy unit the PSTs were completing and the description of the assessment task. The relationality in the task design will be noted with specific reference to opportunities to capture individualized student learning in the gratitude notes. We outline our case study method to analyse three gratitude notes authored by the PSTs for school students.

The Coursework Design

The coursework for this unit is historically located in reviews of literacy teaching in discipline areas outside English. Deakin University led a large research project for the state of Victoria highlighting the need for all secondary teachers to understand how to teach literacy in their particular curriculum area, (Culican, Emmitt, & Oakley, 2001; Luke et al., 2003) and has had a *Literacy Across the Curriculum* unit in the BA/BTeach since the late 1990s. The coursework was designed around learning outcomes that supported the pre-service teacher’s development of literacy pedagogy in their teaching. In re-designing and updating the course, to address PST engagement with the course and our commitment to acknowledging the importance of relationality in teaching, the unit was embedded in two high schools a short distance from the university. Over a nine-week period, each pre-service teacher worked with a school student for an hour each week to support the student’s literacy learning and the pre-service teacher’s pedagogical practices.

The Design of the PST Assessment Task

In the new version of *Literacy Across the Curriculum*, the PSTs worked with the secondary students on some literacy skills. To quickly evaluate their secondary student’s reading comprehension and fluency skills, each PST conducted an individual Prose Reading Observation, Behaviour and Evaluation (PROBE) Reading test with the secondary student, to identify specific literacy skills that they could assist the student with. The first assessment task required the PSTs to use the results of the pre-test to develop an individual learning program to support specific attributes of the school student’s literacy. The learning in this individual literacy learning plan was based on the approach of systemic functional linguistics. The second assessment task required the pre-service teacher to construct five ‘Thank-you’ notes to be given to the school student, which captured student learning as well as what the pre-service teacher learned about the teaching of literacy. Some of the evidence in these ‘thank-you’ notes covered content based on the individual learning plan and systemic functional linguistics.

As part of their second assessment, the PSTs placed post-it notes on these 'thank-you' notes that provided references to readings covered in the unit. During a ten-minute interview with the tutor, the pre-service teacher talked through their learning evidenced in 'thank-you' notes. After the interview, they removed the post-it notes from the 'thank-you' notes and gave the 'thank-you' notes to the student in a bound booklet.

The Participants and the Gratitude Notes

Using an opt-out methodology approved by the relevant ethics committee, all PSTs who submitted work for the second assessment task were invited to participate in this research after their marks had been released to them. Participation entailed consenting to the researchers' use of their 'thank-you' notes as data. Two PSTs opted out of the research. In this paper we have selected three excellent examples, that illustrate what is possible when thinking about assessing literacy pedagogy using relationship understandings of gratitude. The relational approach was not directly an assessment criterion but the PSTs were marked on their ability to engage students in the text they wrote, demonstrating their understandings of purpose and audience. While there were many notes to choose from, we looked for evidence where socially inclusive literacy pedagogies played an important role in the purposes of assessment in the notes.

The Actions

The third element of the framework proposed by Gale et al. (2017) concerns pedagogical actions which 'could be described as tactics that seek to not simply identify students' prior knowledge, interests, or needs, but to engage students' own senses in their "sensemaking" of the world, in practice' (p. 7).

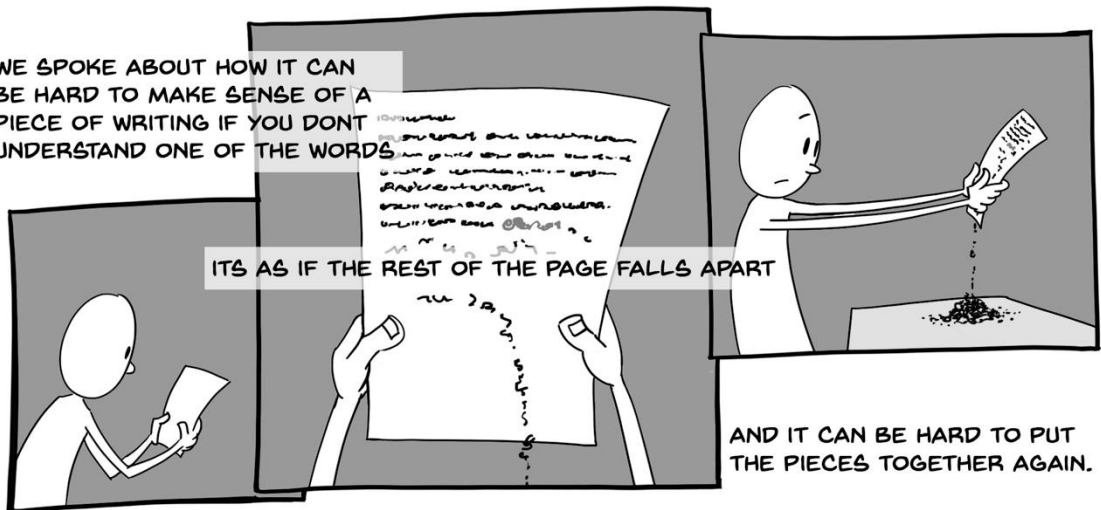
While our pedagogical actions are based on our beliefs as teacher educators, the evidence of the sense-making will come from an analysis of the pre-service teacher's developing understandings of pedagogy and evidence of student learning in the gratitude notes. This is consistent with Gale et al.'s (2017) framework where the impact of teacher beliefs and designs are validated through 'actions or practice that work with students and their communities' (p. 9). In the case of this research, the teacher educators' beliefs and designs are validated by the pre-service teacher's actions leading to socially inclusive literacy pedagogy.

Below are three examples of the 'thank-you' notes authored by PSTs. Each note is analysed for the sense-making in the reflections of literacy teaching that is captured in the note. The actions captured in these notes integrate student learning and pre-service teacher reflections on their teaching. We are presenting three notes as an analysis that articulates what gratitude might look like in an assessment of PSTs' literacy pedagogy.

IN CLASS THIS WEEK...

WE SPOKE ABOUT HOW IT CAN BE HARD TO MAKE SENSE OF A PIECE OF WRITING IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ONE OF THE WORDS

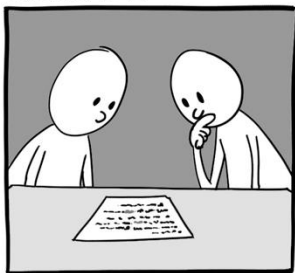
ITS AS IF THE REST OF THE PAGE FALLS APART



YOU WERE SUPRISED THAT I RUN IN TO THE SAME PROBLEM. IT IS EASY TO FORGET THAT WE ARE ALL LEARNING.

WE THEN WORKED THROUGH A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

WE READ IT

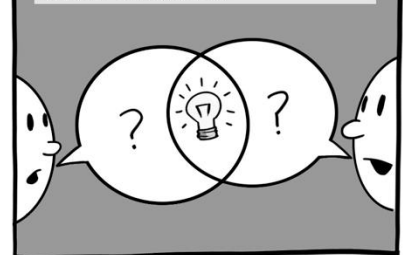


WE FOUND WORDS WE DID NOT UNDERSTAND,

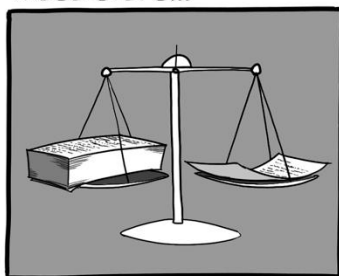


AND LOOKED THEM UP

WE DISCUSSED IDEAS THAT WERE UNCLEAR



AND BY WORKING THROUGH THESE STEPS...



WE MADE A SUMMARY!

THANK YOU FOR REMINDING ME THAT LEARNING GOES BOTH WAYS. I CAN LEARN FROM YOU, AND YOU CAN LEARN FROM ME (I HOPE!)



1.

Figure 1: A Gratitude Note Highlighting that Learning Goes Both Ways

The gratitude note in Figure 1 is a recount of the strategies used by the PST to unpack the meanings of words the student could not understand. The PST has described the incident between himself and the student, drawing on what happened using a modern cartoon style. He has developed a visual metaphor from his analysis of the discussion between himself and the student. He acknowledges the conversation, “In class this week we discussed how it can be hard to make sense of a piece of writing if you don’t understand one of the words. It’s as if the rest of the page falls apart and it can be hard to put the pieces together again”. The PST has taken this discussion and illustrated the metaphor, showing the words falling from the page, forming a pile of unsorted letters. The image extends the initial metaphor in a way that reinforces the shared moment that, “You were surprised that I run into the same problems. It is easy to forget that we are all learning”. Knowing that the students and PST have had this discussion, the images record this moment in a way that celebrates the sharing, but also the PST’s learning from the secondary student. The shared nature of the learning is represented by the graphic that shows the two intersecting speech bubbles with a light globe, symbolising ideas, in the intersection. The PST highlights the importance of dialogue in the teaching of literacy.

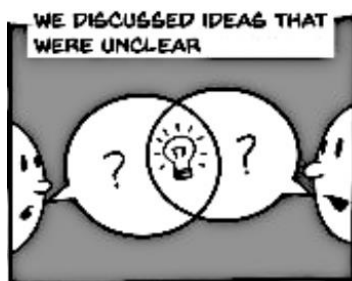


Figure 2: Intersecting Speech Bubbles.

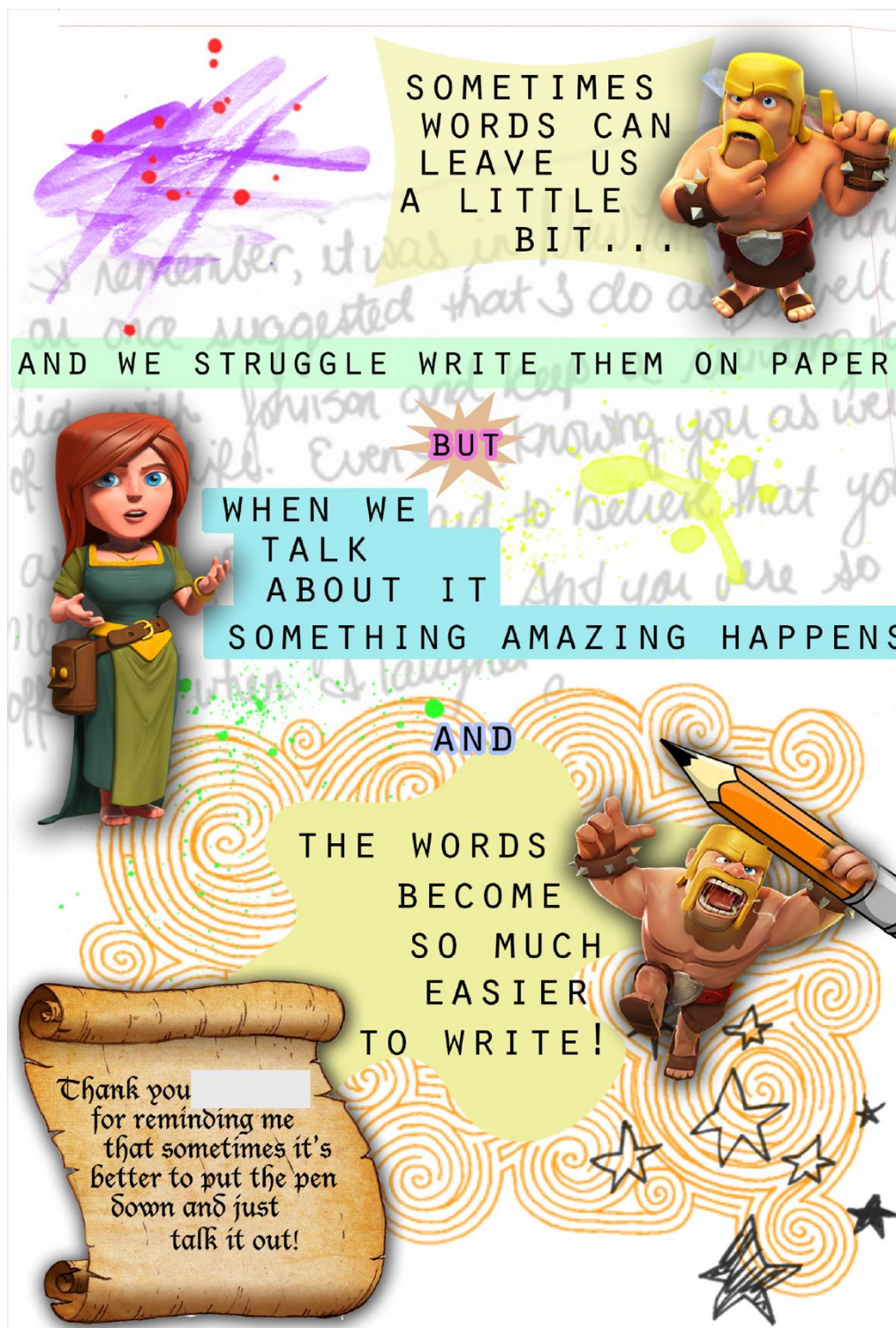


Figure 3: A Gratitude Note Highlighting the Importance of Classroom Talk.

In the gratitude note in Figure 3, the images contained reflect the PST's knowledge of the student's life-worlds, in this case, the *Clash of Clans*, an online multi-player game was used to engage the student to read and enjoy the gratitude text. The characters represented in the text are a barbarian and a villager, and in this game players co-create a shared world and then unite to form a clan so that they can attack other clans and steal their goods. In the

background, the student has used three different images as a watermark style text in addition to a watermark of a page from their notes about working with the student. The cartoon images are integrated with the text, there is a balance between the meaning conveyed through print and the visual representations of the cartoon characters and the other imagery. The words and images work together to make the meaning. In the first sentence, “Sometimes words can leave is a little bit...”, the sentence is finished with the graphic of the barbarian looking confused. The PST shows their learning about the importance of oracy in the teaching of writing in the second section of the note that states, “when we talk about it something amazing happens”. The thankyou section addresses the student directly about the importance of oracy. It is written in gothic font inside a shield, using iconography that mirrors the game’s style. The final section illustrates the idea that the pen is mightier than the sword, as the triumphant barbarian wields a pencil, his sword transformed as “the words become so much easier to write”. The pre-service teacher demonstrated an understanding of the importance of oracy in writing and the importance of supporting students using their funds of knowledge.

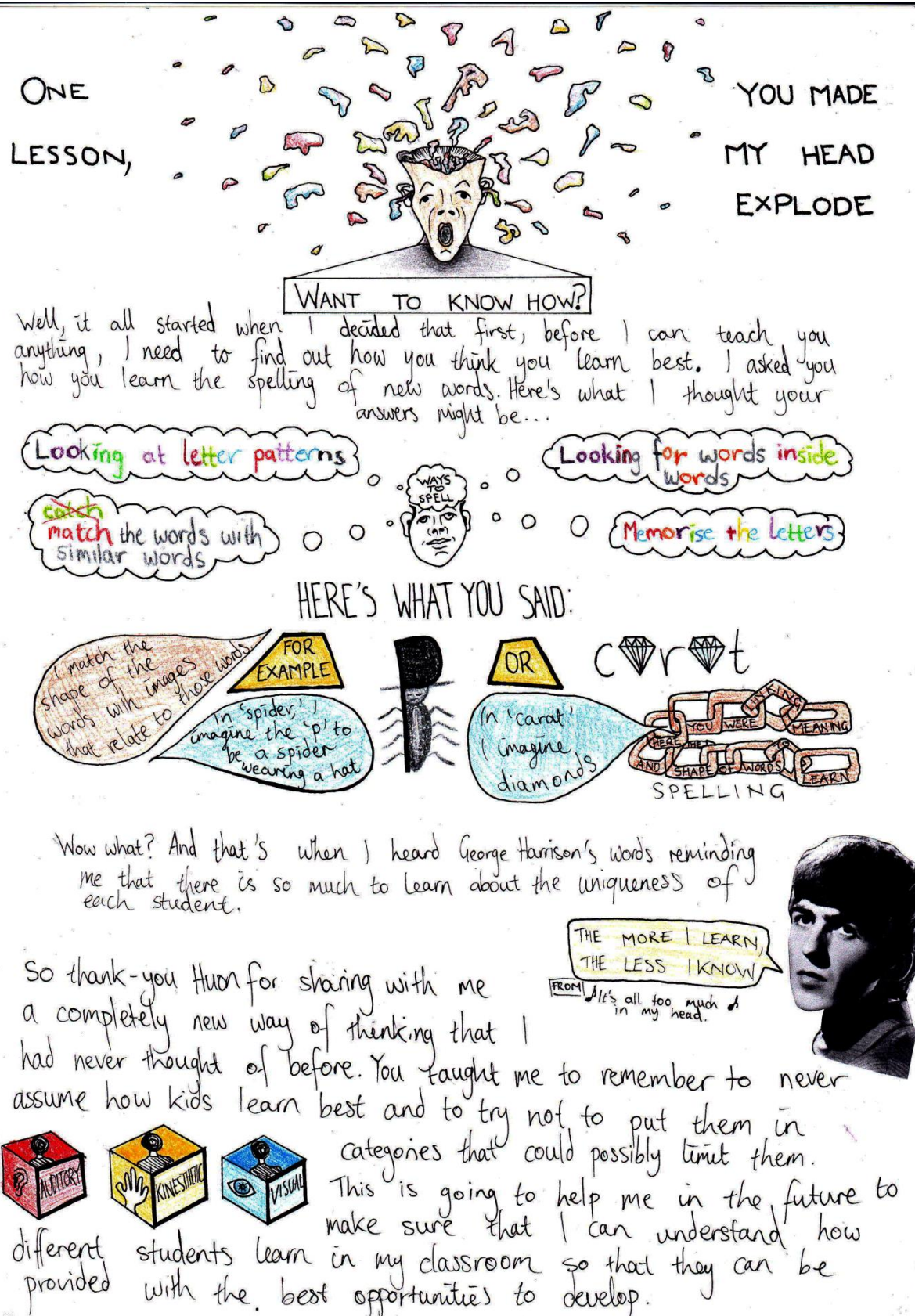


Figure 4: A gratitude note reflecting on different ways of learning.

Using handwriting and personalised images, the gratitude note in Figure 3 provides the student with evidence on the importance of preferred student learning styles as an integral part of student success. The image of the third note begins with an invitation to the student to know their part in the relationship that led to the PST in learning something new. The image is of the PST's head exploding from the excitement of what they have been reflecting on from their interactions and learnings from the student. While the student identified specific ways of spelling that they used using visual methods of scaffolding, the PST was learning about student diversity and acknowledging the importance of individual pathways through meaning making.

While recounting spelling strategies that they can use in the future, the PST illustrates their surprise about the differences between their expectations and what the student told them. Different styles of drawing contrast the expectation and the reality, with the complexity of what the student told them emphasised through the drawing of a chain, that reads "where you were linking meaning and shape of words to learn". The PST identified and creatively mediated in the graphic note how this secondary student uses visualisation to build up their word knowledge. They express the desire to accommodate diversity in their future teaching as a productive way of enacting their pedagogy, stating, "You taught me to remember to never assume how kids learn best and to try not to put them in categories that could possibly limit them".

Four Windows into Assessing PST's Literacy Pedagogy

In this discussion we identify four understandings of assessment that hold potential for PSTs' literacy pedagogy. By using the metaphor of windows, we can look into the social practice of assessing pre-service teachers offered by embedding gratitude in the assessment task.

Assessment Through Narrative

Narratives are an important way that literacy teachers can make meaning from their professional experiences. The narratives found in all three gratitude notes highlight the nuanced way PSTs engaged with the teaching of literacy, drawing on their past experiences. While these narratives are a celebration of the learning the PSTs took from the school student, the PSTs were also 'learning to insert the impossibilities and the incongruities of their teaching narratives into the academic discourses which have ignored them' (Miller, 1995, p. 24). The impossibilities are captured by the pre-service teacher's image in Figure 4 of her head exploding, and the images of the words falling off the page in Figure 1. The impact the students have on PSTs is clearly communicated in Figure 4 with the metaphoric image of a mind exploding. As found in many narratives, these impossible acts are a reminder to the student that the PSTs are not following a scripted way of teaching or seeing the world. The narratives offer the PSTs opportunities to insert their own agency into the assessment task to communicate to the student and teacher educator how they intend to negotiate their teaching of literacy in the future.

Assessment as a Shared Experience

In Figure 1, the pre-service teacher appreciates that he has roles of teaching and learning in his professional responsibilities as a teacher of literacy and has drawn on the work

of Delores (1996), citing that ‘in which each individual would be in turn both teacher and learner’ (p. 21). The recount draws on the student and pre-service teacher’s shared experiences to scaffold word knowledge and text structure which are important in literacy learning (Culican, Milburn, & Oakley, 2006). A feature of the experience that generated the gratitude note was the exchange of roles. The dialogic nature of learning was noted by Freire (1974) who stated, ‘The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach’ (p. 80). The gratitude note provides the pre-service teacher an opportunity to articulate the shared exchange of literacy learning to the student, so the future work with the student can be built upon this dialogic relationship.

Knowing Oneself through the Other

The use of gratitude notes in assessment celebrated PSTs’ assessment tasks with the sole audience of teacher educators. The relational approaches to assessment have drawn on developing a professional identity of a becoming that is in dialogue with the ‘other’. Lévinas (2006) claims that understanding the world through the eyes of the ‘other’, is not just a responsibility, but also a way of sustaining ourselves as we come to know them. A relational approach to assessment provided opportunities for PSTs to come to know their students and themselves, which is critical for future professional practice.

Conclusion

This paper has applied a model of pedagogic work described by Gale et al. (2017) in the context of teacher education to explore what assessment using gratitude might look like in preservice teacher education. We have outlined our beliefs, designs, and actions that span the practice of teacher educators, PSTs, and school students to support the gifting of gratitude notes to school students in a unit on literacy pedagogy for PSTs .

The same gratitude text was read by three different audiences: the teacher educator a pre-service teacher who authored the note and school student. Bakhtin (1981) suggests that texts are defined in the way the writing and reading communities engage in reciprocity affected by the meanings they encode and take from the texts. An important part of what gratitude looks like in assessment is the capacity of the texts to traverse plural audiences in a way that upholds, not only the integrity of the meanings in the texts, but also the integrity of the pedagogy valued by the pre-service teacher. This integrity, coupled with the opportunity to develop a relationship with the school student, provides an authentic assessment experience for the pre-service teacher.

The use of gratitude in the assessment of PSTs provides a way of integrating relationality into the pedagogical work of teacher educators. Just as Bourdieu (1990) suggested gifting binds Kabyle people together through mechanisms of improvisation, charm, and uncertainty, we have demonstrated that the content of gratitude notes from PSTs to school students provides opportunities for a similar act of gifting exchange. Each gratitude note captured something of a little gift the school students gave to the PSTs, enabling them to learn more about teaching. In return, the gratitude from the PSTs to the school students was a symbol of the importance of relationships in their teaching. The opportunity for this gift exchange to be a part of assessment that is generally based on the cognitive recounts of pedagogical theory devoid of relationships with students holds exciting possibilities. Rather

than use relationality to achieve assessment's purposes, we have privileged relationality as the very object of assessment.

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Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the pre-service teachers for the innovative ways they have engaged the middle years student audience with their gratitude notes.