Making authentic links to literacy

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When children think, talk, write and read about things they have experienced first hand, they have an authentic context to frame their literacy interactions and development. They are able to draw upon prior knowledge to visualise and make meaning of the words phrases and texts they are exposed to. Teachers can use this strategically to teach literacy skills in a highly supportive way. There are many ways and many different purposes for making authentic links to literacy through Discovery and Discovery-based inquiry.

Language experience is a term that is sometimes misinterpreted and often under-utilised. Quite simply, language experience is an approach to teaching literacy through use of personal real-life experiences. It helps students to connect thinking, listening, speaking with text creation and making meaning of texts. However, language experience is only one way teachers can make authentic links to literacy in both their teacher initiated inquiries and the student-initiated inquiry that happens during Discovery.

When we make authentic links to Literacy through our inquiry investigations, or through Discovery, it is not the only literacy learning students will do. Explicit teaching of literacy skills through focus groups or other ‘dedicated’ reading and writing times still happen throughout the day and the week. Teachers balance the literacy learning opportunities and are responsive to both the opportunities that present themselves and the needs of their students.

# Why is it important to make authentic links to literacy?

* It is highly supportive- all students can enter into texts (spoken, written and multi-modal) at their own level
* It can be used to stretch children (writing up), going beyond what they could create on their own
* Interconnected- Texts created through language experience can be used to explicitly teach reading strategies
* Eliminates distracting elements (eg lack of vocabulary, conceptual knowledge) so focus can be on literacy skills
* It’s motivational- the text is all about them!

# Creating language experience texts

When creating language experience texts with students we need to consider the needs of the students and determine the purpose for creating the text in the first place.

The purposes could include:

* Learning ‘how to write’
  + Sound letter relationships
  + Letters, words, spaces, sentences
  + Connecting thinking, listening, speaking, writing and reading
* Learning ‘about writing’
  + writing to inform
  + writing to explain
  + writing to narrate
  + writing to persuade
  + writing to instruct
  + writing to describe
  + writing to entertain … etc
  + sentence structure
  + spelling
  + punctuation
  + writer’s craft (purpose and audience, developing voice)
* ‘Exploring the Field’: Developing topic concepts and associated vocabulary (Beverley Derewianka)
* Learning ‘to read’
  + Developing vocabulary
  + Developing concepts about print
  + Phonemic awareness
  + Reading strategies (semantic, syntactic, grapho-phonic, cross referencing, reading on, re-reading etc)
* Learning about reading
  + Developing comprehension skills
  + Exploring synonyms
  + Parts of speech (eg role of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions)
* Modelling an inquiry process
  + Researching process
  + Scientific process
  + Design process
  + Field study process
  + Problem-solving process
* Making connections to the big ideas in the teacher-initiated inquiry
  + Consolidating understandings about science, geography, health, etc.

# Making authentic links between Literacy and the teacher-initiated inquiry

Inquiry and literacy are so closely connected it is impossible to do one without the other. Yet so often we separate these ‘subject areas’ into little boxes in the timetable.

In order to inquire we need to think, to question and to seek answers. We need a language of thinking in order to work through ideas in our head. Once we start to share our ideas verbally we use listening and speaking skills to collaborate. When we seek further knowledge and then share our knowledge we use reading, viewing and listening skills as well as the skills of writing and text creation. We could teach these skills in unconnected ways through ‘stand-alone literacy lessons, then give students opportunities to apply their literacy skills in inquiry (just in case learning). However, when we engage students in a concept or topic and arouse their interest and curiosity we can explicitly teach literacy skills whilst students are inquiring (just in time learning). This is more powerful as the students see a purpose for and have a need to learn skills and use them straight away.

That is not to suggest that all literacy should be taught through inquiry. We run the risk of missing important steps if we think that way. But whenever the opportunities present themselves we should make those connections. These are some suggested ways of using teacher-initiated inquiry as opportunity for language learning:

* Creating a modelled shared language experience texts after a ‘Shared Experience’. These texts could be for any of the purposed mentioned above.
* Create word walls of vocabulary connected to the inquiry to encourage students to ‘recycle’ language either in the talking or their writing. This should be accompanied by visual prompts to support early literacy development. I know we all love sparklebox but…student or student/teacher generated displays are much more authentic and useful than commercially created charts/displays!
* Allowing plenty of time and opportunity for discussion as a whole group, in small groups and in pairs. Whoever is doing the talking in the classroom is doing the most learning, so monitor your own airtime!
* Record students’ thinking and display it using different graphic organisers and thinking tools such as Venn diagrams, brainstorms, data chart, flow charts, speech bubbles etc. Revisit displays to reflect on thinking (teacher modelled, joint construction or individual recording)
* Creating wonderings and discoveries displays to promote good questioning and thinking as well as celebrate new learning. Matching the printed words to spoken words and thinking.
* Bringing in texts (written, visual, multi-modal) that may answer some of the students’ wonderings or that are linked to concepts in the inquiry. Explicitly teaching comprehension skills supporting students to read texts to find out about the topic and especially to answer their own questions. (Modelled, shared and guided reading that can then be practised independently)
* Giving students the opportunity to share their learning in a variety of ways to an authentic audience.

The teacher-initiated inquiry is an opportune time for instructional teaching of literacy skills. This can be done as a whole class, or in small groups depending on the level of scaffolding needed by the students. It can also occur when teachers have conferences or discussions with individual students when they are working independently. The more unfamiliar the students are with the concepts or the skill, the higher the level of support through the following strategies:

* Modelled
* Shared
* Guided
* Interactive

# Making authentic links between Literacy and Discovery

If the teacher-initiated inquiry is an opportune time for instructional teaching, then Discovery (Student-initiated inquiry) is an ideal time for students to experiment with, practise and consolidate literacy skills. Some explicit teaching of literacy skills may happen through Discovery, but it is that opportunity to practise and apply skills in a supportive environment for real purposes that is so valuable. This can be encouraged by:

* Giving students writing time after Discovery.
* Encouraging them to talk about what they did with a partner before writing.
* Modelling how to record what you are thinking about and talking about using a student who has been a focus during share time.
* Valuing their writing or attempts at writing by having them read it to you or others. (For beginning writers this might be drawing and making marks on the page- role play writing)
* Making individual language experience books they can take home and share with parents.
* Including texts and writing tools in all areas/stations in Discovery not just at a writing station or reading corner.
* Limiting the amount of technology used in Discovery and being discerning in the way it is used.
* Including a research area at the later end of the Early Years.
* Recording some key vocabulary and displaying it at relevant stations
* Allowing students to do their ‘Discovery Writing’ in the area they were working.
* Introducing key vocabulary (eg action verbs and dispositions) during the introductions and share time.
* Having quality conversations with students during Discovery. (The art of listening not interrogating!)

# Using Language experience texts to teach reading

Some of the possible purposes for creating language experience texts mentioned before were about teaching reading:

* Learning ‘to read’
* Learning about reading

Teachers can use texts that are co-constructed by students to explicitly teach reading strategies and behaviours such as:

* Recognising/matching sounds and letters
* Recognising high frequency words
* Choral reading (matching written word to spoken word)
* Matching pictures to text
* Creating illustrations to match the text
* Sequencing sentences
* Cloze procedure (semantic, syntactic, grapho-phonic, cross checking)
* Reading to others (by taking home books they have made and reading them to their family they build their perception of themselves as both readers and writers)

# Summary

There are so many ways in which authentic links can be made through both the teacher-initiated inquiry and Discovery in the DBI approach. Language is highly supportive for all students as they can enter into the text at their own level.

At a highly supported level it enables students to focus on the development of literacy skills and behaviours without being distracted by a lack of conceptual understanding of the context. It can also be used to ‘stretch’ children, (eg ‘writing up’) taking them beyond what they could do with unfamiliar contexts. What is most important is that teachers think about the needs of their students and the level of scaffolding they need, when determining the type of strategy they will use and the Learning Intention. The most powerful teaching and learning will occur when the instruction most closely matches the developmental level of the student.