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ETL402 – Literature in Education

Assignment 2

A Case for Literary Learning

Word Count: 3,466

Date Submitted: 17th February 2014

**Introduction**

In a crowded curriculum with an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, it is often difficult for primary teachers to spend an appropriate amount of time teaching history, science and geography. An excellent way to combat this issue is through literary learning. In this context, literary learning is defined as the use of literature to enhance learning in other areas of the curriculum. By integrating literature across the curriculum, teachers are giving their students the opportunity to comprehend what they are learning at a higher level (Guthrie, 2004) and to learn how to empathise with people from an infinite number of worlds both past and present (Cornett, 2007). This paper will focus on literary learning in the History syllabus of the Australian National Curriculum, an area where empathy and the power of story are particularly important.

When children are studying history, they are constantly exposed to humanity and its experiences (Waters, 1999). When taught primarily from a textbook, historical facts can often appear dry and boring, particularly to young children. However, when children are exposed to history through the frame of literature they are given the opportunity to connect with the people and events of history on a personal, empathic level, which can lead to a more organic, holistic view of history than can be provided by a textbook alone (Krey, 1998). The converse is also true; using history as a vehicle for literature can result in literary learning experiences that are simultaneously more interesting and more informative than learning about literature in isolation. By connecting the literature read in ‘literacy lessons’ to other areas of the curriculum, it encourages students to engage in abstract thinking by connecting historical facts to the story and establishing correspondences between history as a structure and history as lived experience (Cornett, 2007). It is important when integrating literacy with history that the integration ensures important history, as well as reading, outcomes are being met (McGuire, 2007). It is also important that the literature selected for integration with the history curriculum is suitable for inclusion; it is primarily the teacher-librarian’s responsibility as an expert in this area to ensure this occurs.

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) and the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) standards of professional excellence for teacher-librarians state that excellent teacher-librarians “collaboratively plan and resource curriculum programs which incorporate transferable information literacy and literature outcomes” (ALIA/ASLA, 2004, p.3). This includes selecting resources that meet professional selection criteria. In this case, this means selecting literature that is historically accurate, developmentally appropriate, of high literary value and presented in a pleasing format that will keep the reader interested (Waters, 1999). Literature that meets these criteria will be most effective at meeting both history and literacy outcomes.

With the Australian National Curriculum gradually being introduced into schools, it is more important than ever that the teacher-librarian has a comprehensive knowledge of the curriculum and is resourcing it appropriately. Students and teachers need to have access to a wide variety of literature that supports the outcomes of the new curriculum if literature integration is to be successful (ASLA/ALIA, 2001). The standards also recommend that excellent teacher-librarians provide access to resources through a professionally managed and efficient system (ALIA/ASLA, 2004). In this instance, it requires teacher-librarians to collate selected resources into categories so classroom teachers can easily locate appropriate literature to use in their programs. If both selection and collation are completed successfully, it opens the door for wider collaboration between classroom teachers and the teacher-librarian.

Although selection of appropriate literature to support the history curriculum is important, there is little point in doing so if classroom teachers are unaware of its existence and potential efficacy for their programs. Teacher-librarians should thus ensure that their teaching colleagues are aware of what literature is available to support their curriculum, and suggest possible ways of integrating the literature into their lessons. This could be done through regular announcements in staff meetings or by directly approaching staff members or stage supervisors with the material. Excellent teacher-librarians would then collaborate with classroom teachers to create integrated literary learning programs which could be taught by both parties (ALIA/ASLA, 2004). Studies show that schools where classroom teachers actively collaborate with teacher-librarians produce students with higher literacy outcomes (Curry-Lance, Rodney & Hamilton-Pennell, 2000). Teacher-librarians that meet the ALIA/ASLA standards are literature and literacy experts that specialise in cross-curricular learning (ALIA/ASLA, 2004) and thus should be utilised for their expertise in how to approach literary learning in a manner which will best benefit the students. The teacher-librarian should ensure school leadership and classroom teachers are aware of their potential and that they are being utilised across the school (Bonanno & Moore, 2009).

The following sections will provide a detailed example of how literature can be successfully used to support the Year 1 history curriculum, including specific teaching strategies which will help students meet the outcomes of both the history and English syllubi, as well as the literacy general capability.

**Curriculum Area: Present and Past Family Life (Year 1 History)**

The Australian National Curriculum’s history syllabus for Year 1 students (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013) is an excellent example of a curriculum area that would benefit from literature integration. Students in Year 1, according to Erikson, are just beginning to look outside their own family and become interested in their neighbourhood and community (Travers & Travers, 2008). The history syllabus for this year-group clearly addresses these needs and the use of literature will help with this transition as books act as a window into other people’s lives, enabling students to put themselves in other people’s shoes and empathise with their situations. The curriculum content teaches students to distinguish between the present and the past, and identify what aspects of family life have changed and remained the same over time. A major focus of the history syllabus at this level is the importance of personal historical narratives; it therefore seems natural that this concern with the narrative form should be extended to high quality literature. This section aims to deconstruct the Year 1 history syllabus and identify key moments of literary learning within it.

The content of the Year 1 History syllabus “provides opportunities to develop historical understanding through key concepts including continuity and change, cause and effect, perspectives, empathy and significance” (ACARA, 2013). Due to its personal nature, literature is excellent at teaching students to empathise with others as it tells stories about people’s experiences and memories. Great literature draws the reader into the story, and the reader comes away from it with greater understanding and empathy for people in similar situations (Cornett, 1999; Almerico, 2013). Therefore teachers should provide a wide variety of literature for students to explore independently, and as part of dialogic reading lessons (see Teaching and Learning Strategies) in order for students to begin to empathise with the lives their parents and grandparents led as children. Some examples of useful literature for promoting empathy and understanding in students include ‘Papa and the Olden Days’ (Edwards, 1989), ‘What was the War like, Grandma?’ (Tonkin, 1994), ‘Three Names’ (MacLachlan, 1991) and ‘When I was Young’ (Dunbar, 2004). Although some children may have heard similar stories directly from their relatives (and retelling of these stories should be encouraged), sharing illustrated tales of bygone eras will give students common ground to discuss (Kinniburgh & Byrd, 2008). Stories may also evoke prior knowledge in some students (Haven, 2007) and trigger them to share personal narratives told to them by their parents or grandparents. This would then demonstrate that these students are beginning to meet the historical skills outcome, “develop a narrative about the past” (ACARA, 2013).

One area that particularly lends itself to the use of literature regarding continuity and change as well as empathy and perspectives is the “Differences in family structures and roles today” (ACARA, 2013) area of the Historical Skills and Understandings section of the syllabus. Although these differences can be demonstrated through expository text types, studies have shown that readers more successfully comprehend and retain information and concepts when they are presented in story form compared to any other text type (Armbruster, Anderson & Ostertag, 1987; Cooper, 1997). By completing read-alouds and dialogic reading of picture books on this topic students can begin to visualise what it would be like to live in another era, and contrast these stories to how they live today. Teachers can guide students to notice particular images that portray customs and objects that are no longer in use and encourage them to identify the positives and negatives of these changes. Exploring a range of literature about the past will also assist in meeting ACARA’s requirement that students “explore a range of sources about the past” (ACARA, 2013).

Both literacy and history outcomes in the national curriculum expect that students should be able to sequence events using appropriate vocabulary by the end of Year 1 (ACARA, 2013), making this area an obvious choice for literature integration. Studies have shown that an understanding of story structure, including sequencing of events, improves comprehension, not only of narrative, but in all areas of the curriculum (Greenhalgh & Hurwitz, 1999; Dalkir & Wiseman, 2004). So not only will integrating literature into this area of the history curriculum assist in achieving history outcomes, it will also benefit students long-term in other areas of the curriculum. Exposing students to a book such as ‘My Place’ (Wheatley & Rawlins, 1987) is a useful starting point for demonstrating sequencing and facilitating simple sequencing activities as it sequences events in one place, enabling students to focus on the temporal flow of events. Building upon this with the more traditional narrative structures of ‘Three Names’ (MacLachlan, 1991) and ‘The Matchbox Diary’ (Fleischman, 2013), to name a few ideal texts, will further illustrate how narratives are structured and provide more difficult sequencing activities for students. Once students are familiar with sequencing and narrative structure, composing their own narrative about the past (ACARA, 2013) should be completed more successfully.

An area of this syllabus that can be quite dense centres around celebrations. ACARA expects students to understand “how the present, past and future are signified … by dates and changes that may have personal significance, such as birthdays, celebrations and seasons” (ACARA, 2013). As mentioned previously, the curriculum is quite crowded and students are required to achieve a large number of outcomes in a limited time period. Because of this, combining history with literature to cover this area of the syllabus may be beneficial. There is a wide variety of literature available that cover the vast number of celebrations around the world (Max Celebrates Chinese New Year [Klein, 2007] and My Grandad Marches on Anzac Day [Hoy, 2006] for example), and teachers can select stories that best relate to their own class group. Literature circles (explored below) are one way in which this content could be covered, as they allow students to explore a number of topics concurrently. By reading stories about children participating in these celebrations, the students are more likely to remember and understand the way they are celebrated, and why they are important (Cornett, 1999; Almerico, 2013).

It is clear that Present and Past Family Life (ACARA, 2013) provides a number of opportunities for literary learning. A themed literature unit using teaching and learning strategies such as dialogic reading, literature circles and digital storytelling would enable students to achieve outcomes from both the English and history syllabi in a meaningful manner. It is to these we now turn.

**Teaching and Learning Strategies**

Dialogic Reading

Dialogic reading, although traditionally used with children under five years old (Lane & Wright, 2007), can be an effective technique when using literature to support learning in other curricular areas. Dialogic reading involves using a variety of prompts to encourage children to respond to what they are hearing and seeing. The most effective prompts for use in cross-curricular reading are distancing prompts, which require students to connect what they are reading to the real world, or in this case, what they are learning in history (Whitehurst, n.d.). Studies show that children that take part in dialogic reading write narratives with a clearer structure (Lever & Senechal, 2011). They are also useful for teaching higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking and synthesizing ideas (Cornett, 2006). However, it is important that the literature is carefully selected to fit with the chosen curriculum, and that the dialogic questioning is directed towards cross-curricular learning if this strategy is to meet its potential. Classroom teachers should call upon the expertise of the teacher-librarian to suggest appropriate texts, or collaborate directly with the teacher-librarian in order to expose their students to a wider variety of relevant texts during their time in the library (ALIA/ASLA, 2004).

Dialogic reading can be used widely throughout the Year 1 history curriculum, to provide students with opportunities to develop empathy and understanding about the lives of their parents and grandparents (ACARA, 2013). Teachers can help students to identify differences between the lives of the characters and their own through, amongst other techniques, open-ended questions based on the pictures (Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003). The teacher could ask, for example, “Do you notice anything strange or different about this picture?”, encouraging students to think critically about what they are viewing. Dialogic reading would also be useful when exploring historical fiction such as ‘What was the War like, Grandma?’ (Tonkin, 1995) as students are only beginning to develop the historical skill “Explore a range of sources about the past” (ACARA 2013), and would require teacher direction to identify historical facts in the story.

‘My Place’ by Nadia Wheatley & Donna Rawlins (1987) describes family life throughout Australia’s history, both in its text and illustrations. It is an excellent choice for the Year 1 History syllabus as it can not only be used for identifying elements of past family life, it also teaches students about continuity and change, as well as story structure and sequencing (ACARA, 2013). However due to its complexity, dialogic reading would be a necessary strategy for reading the text with this age group. The complexity and large amount of information present on each page lend itself to the use of a big book copy of the text so students can notice details of interest to them whilst listening (Lynch, 2008). Teachers can direct historical learning with this text by using distancing prompts; asking students to compare the lives of the children in the book to their own; or open-ended prompts by asking students to identify what has changed or stayed the same in each decade. After reading about each decade, the website (ABC, 2012) and television series (Chapman, 2009) can be used to assist visual and kinaesthetic learners and augment historical learning.

In short, dialogic reading is a useful technique in the teacher and teacher-librarian’s toolkit, particularly insofar as it facilitates the attempt to integrate literary learning in the delivery of the history syllabus. Through establishing correspondences between the text, historical facts and the experiences of students, it represents a fruitful strategy in the effort to produce more integrated and effective literary learning experiences.

Literature Circles

Another useful strategy to integrate literary learning into the history syllabus is literature circles. Literature circles are small student-led groups where students select the same book to read. Students then discuss the book in the group, and present their results to the rest of the class (Lehman, 2007; McCall, 2010). They offer a way for students to participate in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books. It also gives students the opportunity to reshape and enhance their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers (Schlick-Noe & Johnson, 2004). Studies have shown that students participating in literature circles better comprehend what they are reading compared to traditional teacher-led groups, and come away with the same amount of curricular understanding (Klingner, Vaughn, and Schumm, 1998). For this reason, literature circles are an ideal strategy for literary learning as they benefit student comprehension while engaging them in meaningful learning.

For Year 1 students, this will probably be their first experience of literature circles, so more structure will be required than with older grades. McCall (2010) and Geist (1999) suggest giving each student a clearly explained role and stencil to complete in the circle to keep students focussed and on task. Literature circles are an example of inquiry learning, so where possible the teacher-librarian, as a literacy/information literacy expert, should collaborate with the classroom teacher when implementing them to assist students in getting the most out of the activity (ALIA/ASLA, 2004).

The classroom teacher can implement thematic literature circles with their students based around a broad area of the Year 1 history syllabus such as celebrations (ACARA, 2013) in order to cater for student interests, while covering a large number of celebrations in a shorter period of time. Students can choose from a number of narratives about different celebrations, such as ‘Max Celebrates Chinese New Year’ (Klein, 2007) and ‘My Grandad Marches on Anzac Day’ (Hoy, 2006), explore them in detail and then report back to the group about what they have learnt. To ensure that all pupils are getting the most out of this activity, including those with lower reading levels and aural learners, students should have access to online readings of the books (see <http://youtu.be/T-xAUuCQCkE> for an example).

The benefit of using this method is that students can take ownership of their own learning, and become teachers themselves when they report back to the class (McCall, 2010). It also allows students to gain a deeper historical knowledge of an area of the curriculum that interests them. The inclusion of texts about multicultural celebrations also assists students to “explore a point of view” and gain some “intercultural understanding” (ACARA, 2013).

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is an innovative and engaging strategy for literary learning in the history syllabus. Essentially, digital storytelling is a way of combining traditional storytelling with technology. Students can use software like iMovie or Windows Movie Maker, or websites such as [Storybird.com](http://www.storybird.com) or [Littlebirdtales.com](https://littlebirdtales.com/) to create narratives using a combination of text, drawings, photographs, videos and audio. Benefits of digital storytelling include motivating learners, developing media literacy, and opening the door to transformative learning (Christopher, 2011, Yang & Wu, 2012). It enables even the struggling readers and writers to find their voice through narrative as students don’t need to rely purely on their reading and writing skills to express themselves (Fallon, 2010).

Digital storytelling can be implemented in a number of ways depending on available equipment. Students can begin by writing a traditional narrative, which becomes the script for the audio of their story. They can also use storyboarding to combine text and images together before creating the digital story. However, digital storytelling can be time consuming due to its complexity, particularly with young learners, and teachers will need to have access to an appropriate number of computers or tablets for this strategy to be implemented successfully. Collaboration between classroom teachers and teacher-librarians may be helpful here as excellent teacher-librarians possess deep knowledge and understanding about the role of ICTs in education (ALIA/ASLA, 2004).

Prior to having students create their own digital story, students should be exposed to a variety of texts that demonstrate the style of story students should be creating. One area that lends itself to narrative creation is stories about their parents or grandparents childhoods. Books like ‘Papa and the Olden Days’ (Edwards, 1989), ‘Three Names’ (MacLachlan, 1991) and ‘The Matchbox Diary’ (Fleischman, 2013) demonstrate different ways of telling stories about the past, which students could use as examples for their own writing. A benefit of using digital storytelling instead of traditional storytelling in this area is that students can easily share their work with their extended family by distributing the link or file via email, which in turn assists students in finding their own identity (Christopher, 2011; Yang & Wu, 2012).

Digital storytelling can be a powerful tool in assisting students to “develop a narrative about the past” (ACARA, 2013). It also requires students to use a range of communication methods, including digital technologies (ACARA, 2013). Digital storytelling combines both of these historical skills in a manner which potentially enables even the struggling students to achieve these outcomes (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009).

**Conclusion**

Children’s literature is beneficial to students of all ages across the curriculum. In the context of a crowded curriculum, integrating literary learning experiences with the history syllabus enables the more effective and efficient delivery of both. It has been demonstrated here that the integration of quality children’s literature into the Year 1 history syllabus, ‘Present and Past Family Life’ makes the rich stories of history more memorable and more understandable, as well as encouraging students to develop empathy and understanding towards people in foreign situations whilst helping them comprehend narrative structure. Dialogic reading, literature circles and digital storytelling are demonstrably effective strategies for bringing about these outcomes in young students.

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