

A Teacher and Student Enquiry

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As the Curriculum Co-ordinator at my school I was eager to be involved in the STELLA Professional Learning Project as it would give me the opportunity to carefully study a comprehensive set of professional standards available in English/Literacy. I was keen to see how STELLA could be used to direct and assist teachers in evaluating their teaching practices and how it might provide a focus for professional development sessions. I hoped that it would enable me to assist my colleagues in finding a common language to describe our practices.

St Michael's College where I teach offers The Primary Years Program of the International Baccalaureate, which promotes inquiry as a pedagogical approach. Inquiry is a process that moves the learner from his or her current level of understanding to a new and deeper level of understanding. According to Wilson and Jan (2003), in order to be effective inquirers students need to

- identify what it is that they want to know and do
- locate appropriate sources of information
- gather, sort and organise the information
- present the information in appropriate ways
- reflect on what they have learnt and the inquiry process
- think about ways of applying their newly gained information to other situations.

I had noted during the course of Term 1 that many of my students had difficulty in locating resources independently and selecting appropriate facts. I decided to focus on helping my class develop their information/research skills in order to help them increase their autonomy when conducting their own research. I aimed to make the steps for learning these skills explicit to them. In an era of ever increasing and rapidly changing information provision and presentation, it is important, too, that my students are taught how to critically select and use the resources best suited to their information needs and purposes. I needed to plan for effective teaching and learning of research skills within a meaningful contexts. At this stage I visited the STELLA website to see how I could use it to assist my planning.

After spending some time previewing the website with its numerous standards, key words and narratives and language modes, I decided to focus on the standards for reflection which are a summary of best teaching practice in English/Literacy teaching. I chose to work with standard *2.1 Teachers plan for effective learning*, and I used the core descriptors to reflect on my practice and direct my teaching. As the unit of inquiry my class was undertaking was on Cultural Expression and the boys were going to be sharing their learning through a PowerPoint and information report, there were a number of literacy skills that needed to be explicitly taught in order for them to be successful. All four modes – writing, reading, viewing, listening and speaking – were to be integral to the teaching of this unit and I noted that all modes had very clear descriptors within STELLA to reflect on.

After carefully reading the core descriptions of standard 2.1 I noted that accomplished English/Literacy teachers keep in mind in their planning, the connections between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. This reaffirmed my belief that skills and understandings are best taught and assessed within meaningful and connected contexts. The integrated unit would provide such planned contexts for learning, teaching and assessing.

Firstly I decided that it was imperative to find out what the boys already knew about the research process and the purpose for researching and ascertain what their areas of difficulty were, so I conducted a written survey on their understanding of researching. The data helped me to establish clear objectives for the teaching program. The survey showed that a number of the students had a very narrow view of where information could be gathered from; books and the internet were the common responses. It was also evident that most of them found it difficult to independently locate appropriate resources and to select appropriate facts. Most mentioned that they often just cut and paste sections of text from the internet or ask their parents for assistance. I then revisited the core descriptions and noted that I needed to use the information I had gathered – *the knowledge of the class dynamics and the needs of individual students* – to ensure I developed *both rigorous long term educational goals and focused instructional goals that ensure all my students had the opportunity to engage in purposeful and challenging literacy learning*. To do this effectively I decided to work collaboratively with the Information Technology teacher, the librarian and the ESL teacher, in order to fully support my students. I revisited the standard elaboration and noticed that it emphasised that accomplished teachers *draw on their familiarity with, a wide and flexible repertoire of instructional practices and extensive knowledge of textual resources including information and communication technologies*.

I chose the information report genre as the basis of the literacy program. The students would write an information report on the people from a country that one of their ancestors originated from and inform their audience of how the people of that country express their culture. A variety of experiences was planned to help the students develop an understanding of the purpose, structural features and language features of an information report. I decided to use the Curriculum Cycle to provide the framework for structuring the teaching of the genre. This cycle encourages a constructivist approach to learning where children are building on prior knowledge, linking new knowledge to existing knowledge. Throughout this cycle of teaching I introduced the information process skills, concentrating on: defining, locating, selecting, organising, presenting and assessing.

There were four main stages of the curriculum cycle that I worked on, often moving back and forth between them.

Negotiating the Field

During this stage I introduced a range of activities to identify what the students already knew, thought and felt about culture. These helped the students become engaged with the topic. The students brought from home items they thought depicted culture, viewed videos, interviewed people, made generalisations about what they thought culture meant and organised their ideas in concept maps. Here I was concentrating on the skills of defining and locating. We defined the topic using concept mapping. Then we looked at locating. We discussed the strategies to use in order to locate appropriate resources using school resources and local library resources. During our library lessons the students discussed where they could find information and how to locate information for their research. The notion of primary and secondary resources was introduced and key words, index, contents, glossaries, catalogues and search engines were discussed.

The children were also encouraged to make contact with their local libraries to find out what services they offered. The core description in 2.1 *recognises that both the school community and wider society provide authentic resources that extend the language and learning abilities of their students*. I decided to find a way to use the findings that I had gathered from surveying the students about researching and look for a means of including the community. With the help of the librarian I set up a task where children were asked to make contact with a librarian at

their local library and find out about the resources and facilities it offered and how the librarians could provide them with assistance when they are researching. A newsletter explaining the purpose of the task was sent home to inform parents and the parents were asked to support the process. Local council libraries were contacted. This was a way of including both the parent community and local community *to constructively incorporate authentic resources into the curriculum*. This proved to be an extremely useful activity with much positive feedback from students and parents about the amount they learnt from the experience. Many students who relied on a computer or the school library as their sole resources were excited by the fact that they were able to borrow their own resources and that there was such a variety to choose from. Video, CDs and pamphlets were some of the types of resources the students brought in.

Deconstruction and Joint Construction

During this stage the information report genre became the focus and a range of activities were provided that helped the children identify the purpose, language features and structure of the text. The investigations revolved around explicit teaching sessions that involved whole group, small group and individual tasks. At this point it became necessary to work on developing their strategies to assist them with locating and accessing information and selecting the information. The skills were taught in meaningful contexts at the students' point of need. Here the students focused on the skill of selecting. In order to assist with this stage we developed a framework for their information report. I modelled the approach for note taking using a shared text on Australia. The skills of skimming and scanning for information were introduced as was the process of keeping a record of the information sources used. I encouraged the use of a variety of sources.

We then worked on the skill of organising. I once again demonstrated, this time how to turn notes into sentences using the notes taken as a class from the shared text, jointly constructing our text on Australia. As we reread our completed text the students raised numerous suggestions on how we could improve it. Paragraphing, topic sentences, conjunctions and reference items were introduced, and each aspect was included in our jointly constructed report on Australia.

Independent Construction

The students were then able to begin the process of independently writing their own notes on their country and then their own information reports. They discussed the skill of presenting and how they would share their learning. Oral and PowerPoint presentations were used in conjunction with the written report. Throughout this stage they revisited the information process skills we had covered earlier and used the knowledge they gained through our exposure to the text type. They worked confidently throughout this stage.

Assessment was on-going rather than summative. Students reflected on their own learning in terms of process and product. Regular assessment throughout the stages provided me with useful information about the students' learning, which could not be gained simply from assessing a finished piece of writing. In order to address standard 2.1 it was clear that I needed to do this: [accomplished teachers] *continually re-evaluate and adapt plans to take account of the impact of new knowledge on the changing language and literacy needs of their students*. Although difficult to do at times, discussing my findings with the librarian and ESL teachers as the needs arose, made it easier to cater for the changing needs. It was evident that in order for the unit to be pertinent to the needs of my students I had to find appropriate resources and create my own. Standard 2.1 acknowledges that that teachers be *discriminating in their selection of resources, developing and adapting materials to meet curriculum requirements and providing their students with challenging, authentic language experiences*. I found this somewhat challenging at times as life in the classroom is always hectic and time limited.

As I reread 2.1 I often glanced at the key words that identified the attributes that can be used to describe accomplished teaching, in order to prompt greater reflection and assist my literacy planning. The key words of *responsibility*, *negotiation*, *repertoire* and *resources* were all useful in analysing my teaching. I ensured that I used a *repertoire* of literacy teaching strategies in order to ensure good teaching for all my students. I thought I met my *responsibility* by ensuring that opportunities for regular assessments of the process and product were provided throughout the unit to ensure that I was fully supporting the students' learning. I also used a variety of teacher *resources* to assist with developing my understanding of the skills to be taught and strategies to be employed and ensured that the students were able to access a variety of *resources* and mediums to share their learning. I looked for ways to encourage greater *negotiation* within my teaching by providing opportunities for the students to be engaged with the topic, finding out what they already knew, ascertaining students' questions about and interest in the topic.

Conclusion

There were a number of benefits in using the Curriculum Cycle and the STELLA materials as frameworks for my teaching. Firstly, the cycle strategies provided my students, colleagues and myself a metalanguage with which to talk about our learning. The students enjoyed the hands-on activities that were undertaken during the deconstruction and construction stages of the curriculum cycle. It was an active and social process where a great deal of oral language was used and the key to much of the learning that occurred. The students were given numerous opportunities to explore, clarify and extend their understanding of grammar in meaningful and supportive contexts. They were also well supported in their learning with the explicit teaching of language and structural features of genre and the research skills. This explicit teaching greatly benefited all students, but in particular my ESL students and students with specific learning difficulties, enabling them to achieve greater success and continue to be risk takers in their learning. These students were greatly supported due to the regular assessing that occurred throughout the process. Although the unit took longer than most units, the focus was on the process rather than finished product. The children displayed improvements in locating a variety of suitable resources, selecting appropriate facts and using note taking skills, organising the notes into clearly written texts containing appropriate visuals and citing references correctly as well as a great deal of understanding about how different people around the world express their culture.

Being involved in the STELLA Project provided me with the opportunity to stop and think about my teaching, about why some activities worked better than others. The focus questions helped me to construct thoughtful affirmations of my practice and informed my decisions about future professional development needs. It has reinforced my thoughts about the importance of engaging students in their learning, as it became quite clear that involved students were more highly motivated to achieve. It has also given me valuable insight into how our beliefs and knowledge form the basis of the teaching and learning experiences we provide in the classroom. It is through this reflection and discussion of the teaching experiences we provide, that our understandings, knowledge and expertise grow. As I reflected on standard 2.1 I discovered that in order to plan for effective learning it was really important that *I know my students* (1.1). There was also a clear link to 1.2: *Teachers know their subject* and 2.3: *Teachers assess and review student learning and plan for future learning*. The more I continued to read through the standards, the more I could see other links to other standards.

It became clear that STELLA would be a useful tool to use with the teachers at my school as a means of reflecting on their literacy practices. It would provide a useful framework to guide and assist professional dialogue and to help develop the understanding of what constitutes accomplished English teaching. As there is way too much professional development material to cover in any one session, I would choose specific

standards and corresponding key words to address. Small professional learning teams could be established and opportunities given where the teams are provided with one of the narratives in STELLA and then asked to look for evidence of the standard using the focus questions under the key words to guide their discussions. I would then see it as important to follow this up with some whole group sharing time as well as time to independently consider the standard and focus question in light of their own practice.

Reference

Wilson, J, and Jan, L.W. (2003) *Focus on Inquiry - A Practical Approach to Integrated Curriculum Planning*. Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation.

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