

I Know What Being Literate Means: Student Teacher Accounts

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To understand what students mean when they say “I know what it means to be literate”, a survey of 309 secondary and primary beginning student teachers was undertaken on the first day of orientation 2006 with the aim of eliciting descriptions of their conceptions of their understandings of literacy, their regard of the importance of these in their career choice, and their expectations of developing and attaining high levels of personal literacy skills through university studies.

Background to study

The development of effective literacy skills as “the social practice of applying a system of language” (QSCC, 2002, p.4) is fundamental to current educational frameworks and is pursued by way of a multiliteracy pedagogy for understanding and using the various modes of communication - “reading, writing, viewing, spelling, speaking, and listening” (QSCC, 2002, p.4). It is a cross-curricular priority of the Queensland School Curriculum Council, literacy being no longer the absolute responsibility of the English curriculum although many forms of literacy have their roots there.

It has been suggested in a submission to the British *National inquiry into the teaching of literacy* (Michaelson, 2005) that “applicants for ... teacher training should be assessed for their suitability and their personal level of literacy skills before being accepted” (*Summary*) and that their skills should be “of a high standard”. As the writer asks, “One would expect that graduating ... teachers can speak correctly, spell and write correctly and that they can read aloud correctly. If they cannot do so, how can they teach?” (p.3). It is appropriate therefore that pre-service student teachers in the English curriculum area, secondary and primary, be subjects for this study.

Literature outlining the attributes of effective literacy teachers and *best practice* states that teachers would hold and articulate “clear and cohesive views about the meaning of the term *literacy*” (Braithewaite, 1997, cited by DET, 2005, *The attributes of a good literacy teacher*); “model strategies and processes for undertaking learning and practice activities, using their own and students’ background knowledge” (Green & Campbell, 2003, p.59); “demonstrate professional behavior and a positive attitude” (Sipp, 2004, cited in Starr, 2004, *A teacher*

compact); and be a “master” of their discipline (Sheffield, 1974, cited in *Teachers and students*, 1999, Section 2.).

Tertiary pre-service teacher education courses, in my experience, advocate a literacy pedagogy which aims to develop such attributes however much of this presupposes that beginning students function beyond the basics of literacy practices in their own oratorical, writing, and reading skills. Course feedback from a second year secondary English pre-service education course indicates however that even at this level of study, 29% of students surveyed over four years of the course consider that their writing literacy is neither *fine*, *good*, nor *very good* (Penn-Edwards, 2005). In practice, many students undertaking teacher training do not have these skills and this impacts on completion rates of courses and retention of students in programs.

Also, course feedback from a first year secondary English pre-service education course indicates that literacy is perceived only as referring to simplistic writing skills, not to the current holistic sense of understanding language and a range of text types (data being collated, Penn-Edwards). Despite not appearing to value these skills for themselves, students still aspire to be English teachers, a phenomenon not remarked upon in the literature. If teaching training is to be research led and successful in developing effective teachers of literacy then there must be a clear understanding of this paradox. Questions that could be explored are: What does *literacy* mean to beginning student teachers? (Is it seen as discipline related?, What communication modes does it include?); What emphasis do beginning student teachers place on achieving personal literacy skills and on the demonstration of teachers’ literacy skills?; What do the students believe they will be taught in their courses as regards to literacy?

Survey data

Student responses from the Orientation survey were collated in terms of age, sex, state or private schooling, date of year 12 studies, areas of work experience, and travel experience.

As an interesting and unexpected sideline to this research it was found that only 57% of students were able to respond without spelling or grammatical errors. The fact that many gave ‘bullet point’ answers was considered in identifying the latter. Common examples of misspellings were comunication, comprohend, competence, compitently, competence, emprove, grammer, gramma inturpret, interprete, interpeting, intererpt, literacey, reeding, speleing, speall, speeching, wriiting, wrihting, writen, threw (through). The verbatim quotations given in the following discussion of results illustrate the poor quality of grammar and spelling.

Qualitative data results

When students were asked to explain what the term *literacy* means responses ranged from the more common “reading & writing” or “grammar, spelling, writing” to the more comprehensive, “the ability of a person to interpret, understand and communicate their external and internal environment”. A few replies were more exotic: “there is no specific definition, it differs with each person” and “literacy defines life, it’s a way to view stereotypes and issues throughout the world”.

Responses to the question “What do you think the role of literacy is in learning and education?” were mostly prosaic “everyone should be able to spell!” and “to help understand

and remember certain information that needs to be learnt.” Others went beyond the acquisition of skills and included reasons for learning literacy “getting children to be able to read, write - so that they are able to survive throughout life!”; “to teach concepts that enable a person to continue to learn”; and “it’s role is to prepare students for the real world and future of their studies and/or work/career.”

When asked to comment on what they believed their literacy skills were replies generally gave versions of writing, reading, spelling, and grammar, some with a twist such as “ability to manipulate language and grammar to communicate”. Many commented on their perceived level of skill which ranged from “excellent reading and understanding of written language - poor spelling”, “could be a lot better, but will improve” to “I don’t believe I have any good literacy skills as my worst subject at school was English” and sadly “I believe that I have very poor literacy skills”, and “read, write, spelling is inadequate - grammar is almost none” and “as I don’t think I have any that’s why I’m going to uni to learn about it.”

The final question was “How do you expect University courses to encourage and increase literacy for you as a student teacher in your area of study (primary or secondary English)?” Students’ awareness of what the teaching degree offers them varies from acquiring knowledge of literacy within the curriculum “by teaching the different methods of reading and writing and relearning the rules and so improving my literacy skills enabling me to teach it properly”, to personal development, “university will help increase my literacy skills through my lectures & mainly feedback by my tutorials on my work”, “by giving assessments that require research” and “giving constructive criticism on any assignments, oral presentations etc. so students are aware where they need to improve their skills” to believing that specific lessons will be given at a basic lower secondary level: “help give me grammar lessons again, where to use punctuation” and “would like further training in grammar & the use of verbs, adjectives, nouns”.

Ongoing analysis of qualitative data

This data which is concerned with recording conceptions of phenomena will be further analysed using phenomenographic protocols focusing on “the phenomena of learning, studying, communication, teaching and instruction” (Svensson, 1997, p.161) by exploring “the world as perceived” (Säljö, 1988, p.36) by the subjects of the research through their expressed understandings or “accounting practices” (Säljö, 1997, p.184). It permits various tools, such as surveys, to be used in the collection of data in order to allow an investigation into “how things are conceived of by persons” and aims to “describe differences between conceptions” (Dahlgren & Fallsberg, 1991, p.151-2). The students’ conceptions will be identified and located with reference to each other using the software program *Leximancer* which identifies the key words used in survey responses. Conceptions which are indicated by these key words are then able to be placed in a logically structured map known phenomenographically as the *Outcome Space* which shows “the different ways in which it [the phenomenon] can be experienced” (Marton, 1994, p.92). This will then underpin a profile of the literacy teacher role in the eyes of beginning pre-service student teachers and may be compared to national and state professional standards.

Quantitative data results

Students were asked to indicate the level of skill (1 low,, 5 extremely good) they felt a competent teacher in their area of study (primary or secondary English) needs to possess as

well as the level of skill which they believe they had when starting education courses and if further development was warranted.

For example, in terms of communication skills, 97% of students indicated that a competent teacher in their area of study should have the highest level (5) in verbal & nonverbal communicating, informing, persuading, and so on but only 5% of the students surveyed believed that they possessed this skill now, with 25% feeling they had a good level of skill and 58% a satisfactory level. Twelve percent rated their own existing skills as a level 2 or below.

In the one area of writing skills, 86% of students indicated that a competent teacher in their area of study should have the highest level (5) of Grammar but only 10% believed that they had this skill now with 41% feeling they had a good level of skill and 39% a satisfactory level. 10% rated their existing own skills as a level 2 or below.

Interestingly, only 33% of students indicated that a competent teacher in their area of study should have the highest level (5) of ICT / computing skills with only 10% believing that they had this skill, 32% feeling they had a good level of skill and 38% a satisfactory level. Twenty percent rated their existing own skills as a level 2 or below.

A number of case studies can be presented of students who prior to university studies rated their skills poorly but who aspired to be teachers with high level skills. In particular their expectations as to how they will increase their skill level during their four years of studies will be examined.

Discussion

The study results present an interesting profile of early pre-service student teachers and there is no doubt that this is an area of concern that has to be addressed in teacher training programs. This raises a numbers of questions for discussion about what, how, when and by whom:

What is literacy? Whose literacy is this?

Is it the role of such programs to teach basic literacy skills?

If not, what effect would entry standards have?

Should such programs include dedicated courses which *develops* students into *competent literate teachers*? or

Should in-depth orientation programs perform a *transition* effect?

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