



Writing Our Futures? Creativity and Literacy
Engagement Empowering Student Identity.

Scott Welsh

EasyChair preprints are intended for rapid dissemination of research results and are integrated with the rest of EasyChair.

May 22, 2023

Writing our futures? Creativity and Literacy engagement empowering student identity

By Dr. Scott Welsh, Victoria University, University of Melbourne

INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL & CULTURAL LITERACIES

With many thanks to Professor Mary-Rose McLaren, Larisa Perera and Jill Barnard who developed the course I describe below. Also, the students who contributed their work: Chantelle Temple, Travis Rand, Hamza Hallak, and Vy Huynh.

What is literacy? I often describe it to my students as the encoding and decoding of symbols and signs. In this unit, we attempt empower students to encode and decode themselves. In what follows, I describe the processes we use in this Diploma level program, located in a socially and culturally diverse context. The project sought and was granted ethics approval from the Victoria University Ethics Committee, and all student participants and authors gave their consent to use their work and names for the purposes of this presentation.

WHO SAYS THE DOMINANT WAY OF SPEAKING & WRITING IS THE RIGHT WAY? (Freire 2009)

if literacy is encoding and decoding meaning, if that's what we're doing when we practice literacy, then can't the rules be anything for each unit of meaning? where does meaning come from and can't we make our own meaning, and way of deciphering it? as Paulo Freire (2009) says, 'who says that the dominant way of speaking or writing is the right way?'

In the literacy program I taught in the diploma of education studies at Victoria University, titled 'Learning through Literacy EDC1008,' the emphasis was on owning literacy and language, through an honest reflection on how your own personal style of literacy came to be and using it to create a story of the self-inside a literacy journey, becoming literate by creating one's own sense of literacy. Then telling your literacy story, using the medium of fictional or stylistic genre. This ultimately means that we are exploring the idea of self, in creating an image and a series of 50-word annotations. Following this, we encourage students to create a picture book and make a video of themselves reading it. This process tends to the practice of speaking and listening, imperative to literacy learning, also simultaneously practising visual literacy, then a reflection on the entire process is a component of the assessment. Students learn spelling and grammar through doing; this is not assessed but rather practised. The process of reading aloud to a camera creates an awareness of mistakes and areas for improvement. The 300-word reflection introduces students to the practice of "critical literacy", or university language; this is something with which many are extremely unfamiliar and for whom is particularly alienating. Finally, we explore the being of self in the world of words and meaning through the articulation of one's literacy journey in the medium of a fictional genre. This is scaffolded with a brief practical study of Shakespeare.

CASE 1: Shakespeare & Creative Writing

I utilised Shakespeare in the classroom with the Freirian perspective and mission in mind. We wanted students to own literacy, like the Nietzschean perspective on morality in Beyond Good and Evil, where he advocates an owning and remaking of the 'good', in order to free it from the dogmas of the past (Nietzsche 1944). In an exercise to develop students' creative writing skills and agency in terms of literacy, they were given a Shakespeare monologue and asked to identify five images, pictures, visual metaphors that bring the writing alive for them. This was coupled with technical knowledge of metaphors and metonymy from previous classes. Students were then encouraged to apply this poetic technique to their own writing, using a choice of various genres and prompts to retell their literacy journeys.

Here is one brief example in response to the prompt: A Literacy Journey told in letters, between a parent and a child.

A LITERACY JOURNEY IN LETTERS Chantelle Temple, student author

As I sit here and compose this letter, I look up at the sky so blue, it reminds me of your eyes. The breezy wind freely drifts by capturing the sweet-smelling fragrant of the blossoms, as I ponder on my literacy journey. I didn't have a Mr Truman, but it was also a time in my life that was not as attractive as the colours in the rainbow. It saddens me to hear that someone like Mr Truman made you feel this way by making you read out loud with no support. Literacy is a must, a battle of two worlds colliding, but at the same time united, the dance of words and language so many must endure. For me it was a time of being blindfolded in a dreary reality, where I am forced to learn this unusual language, which had more rules than what was found in the classroom. My peers were like sheep on the farm, I was the rebel of the herd, I could not remember the articulation of phonics, nor the basic fundamentals of literacy.

CASE STUDY 2: HEARING STUDENT VOICES

Assessment 3 Final Piece

Autobiography

Travis Rand:

Stories Have Made My Story

Travis: I was born on the 5/12/1996 on a Thursday morning at 11:48am, I didn't breathe for the first two minutes after I was birthed and wouldn't open my eyes for a further 6 minutes, until my father gently tickled me under the chin. It's majestic to think that my first ever vision after being brought into this world was seeing my dad, holding me in his arms, with a loving smile on his face as he woke me up. I was 3kgs and 19cms with bright blue eyes and a mischievous smile.

A dark cloud descended on my academic journey in High School.

I vividly remember watching everyone in front of me check the lists and turn to their friends in celebration of being in the same classes. I got to the front of what felt like a mosh pit only to have the Year Level Coordinator look to me to say "Travis, you're in VCAL next year." Before I could even begin to search for my name. I'll never forget that day, it's a day that changed my life forever. I often wonder what my life would be like now if I had walked up to that window and found my name amongst the class lists of the mainstream classes for following year, I sometimes fantasise about all the schooling experiences I missed out on such as camps, graduation, muck up day and formal.

I was reminded of Allen Ginsberg. "You should read Howl by Allen Ginsberg" I felt he may identify with the radical voice and the empowerment that can come with exploring one's own subaltern perspective. I also identified with the feeling of exclusion and felt that sometimes this can be transformed through considered and critical transgression and rebellion.

Travis: Out of curiosity I gave it a read. I began reading and although the poem was complicated, the first line, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" really spoke to me on a personal level. I feel like my mind has been destroyed by the madness of my past, and I'm now trying my best to salvage it. Though it was confusing, I felt a strong connection to story in the poem.

While I often wonder what my life would look like if I hadn't been placed in VCAL without my consent all those years ago, I can't help but also consider the things I have to be grateful for. I've made many friends throughout my life, and I've also found my passion for teaching, and I believe had I done VCE I wouldn't have met these amazing people and found my passion.

I believe everything happens for a reason, these stories have made my story, and I'm excited to see what my next chapter holds.

CASE STUDY 2 LET THE STUDENTS SPEAK: Hamza's video

By encouraging experimentation and creativity in the classroom, as well as applying encouraging assessment as learning, where rubrics are based around effort and participation, rather than getting literacy 'right,' students come to acquire a sense of ownership of the classroom and their own literacy. It is important to note that many of these students were dreading literacy prior to undertaking the class. Here is video data of a student displaying a sense of ownership over his poem telling the story of his literacy journey:



10000000_6832177963464408_3548184153292147021_n (1).mp4 (Hallak 2023)

By Hamza Hallak

The importance of play, experimentation and fun is apparent in this extract. This borrowing of one of the primary principles of Vygotsky's method lays the foundations for a learning environment ideal for learning a love of literacy.

CASE STUDY 4: CREATIVE PRACTICE, LITERACY & VOICE

Excerpts from Vy Huynh's picture book.

Vy is extremely shy, self-consciously so. However beneath the shyness, there lurked genius of kinds. During class, she would continuously sketch in her drawing pad, with perfect replicas and interpretations of almost everything she saw. I asked her to draw my cat from a photo. It was not only an excellent picture of a cat, it captured his being and unique experience. She was terrified of reading her picture book aloud and we had many conversations that brought her to this moment, a personal literacy event in her story, that I believe is valuable to all of us:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auA7eBcbFT0&t=1s> (Huynh 2023)

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Applying the theoretical foundations of 'new futures' thinking from Utopian and Dystopian Studies at University of Melbourne to the practical examples of learning literacy through doing from Victoria University, we see the presence of utopian and dystopian knowledges in the students' stories of themselves and their own personal literacy journeys (Dutton 2023). Ginsberg's *Howl*, as dark and disturbing as its content may be, lays the foundations for a utopian vision of the student participant's own future literacy. Rather than being a crushing blow, the student takes the line 'I saw the best minds of my generation...' and finds solace in the 'stories that made their stories.' Similarly, the rap song format of the second student's performance of his 'literacy journey' represents a Nietzschean reappropriation of a language to describe the self and his autobiographical account of his literacy journey. Finally, the Dystopian vision contained in the picture book read in a dark monotone denotes an inner turmoil that comes from literacy and communication challenges in the

contemporary social world. In all three cases, the journey to overcoming these challenges comes through beginning with the applied creative practice of literacy.

CONCLUSION

The students in the case studies above, and others who undertook the course, described a fear and dread at the prospect of studying literacy. They were almost universally accustomed to failure in this area. By embedding student-centred creative practice into learning or familiarising literacy through its appropriation by the self and one's experiences, students developed a love of literacy learning that made it their own. This contributed to students' interest in further exploring literacy, in what Freire terms the 'cultivated' form, and may provide a way forward for future literacy education practices.

REFERENCES

- Freire, P. (2009). *Freire Institute*, accessed online at <https://www.freire.org/paulo-freire> 17-04-2023.
- Ginsberg, Allen, 1926-1997. *Howl, and Other Poems*. San Francisco :City Lights Pocket Bookshop, 1956.
- Hallak, H.(2023). *My Literacy Journey*. An in-class reflection.
- Huynh, V (2022). *Muted*: a video reading of an original picture book, accessed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auA7eBcbFT0&t=1> on 22-04-2023.
- Galviz, C. L., & Spiers, E. (2021). Introduction: Why social futures?. In *Routledge Handbook of Social Futures* (pp. 1-18). Routledge.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 1844-1900. (1990). Beyond good and evil: prelude to a philosophy of the future. London, England ; New York, New York, USA: Penguin Books.*
- Rand, T. (2023). *These stories have made my story*. Melbourne, Australia. Victoria University in-class assessment-published with author's permission.
- Temple, C. (2021). *My Literacy Journey*. Melbourne, Australia. Victoria University in-class assessment-published with author's permission.