

Open Forum

Evidence and/or theory?

By Jan Hagston

This is the second of Jan Hagston's regular contributions to the Open Forum section of *Fine Print*. After stressing the value of professional reading and learning and acknowledging that teachers are time poor, Jan opts for literature reviews and reports. How do you keep up with your professional reading and development?

Increasingly, over the last few years I've been required to provide evidence to justify different aspects of my work. No longer is it OK to suggest something based solely on experience and/or a theoretical approach. For instance, I have needed research to justify using a problem solving approach in one context and a direct teaching approach in another, or group work as opposed to individual activities, contextualised vocabulary development as opposed to decontextualised, etc. While I welcome this move to having an evidence base for education programmes and materials, it has meant consulting relevant literature. And we all know that takes time!

At times I have cursed this but overall it has been rewarding. Apart from new knowledge, there have been other benefits:

- I have become a big fan of good literature reviews and meta-analyses.
- I have had to modify some of my ideas and views.
- I have started to think about the relationship between evidence and theory.

Literature reviews and meta-analyses

I'm not someone who reads research for the sake of it; I need a purpose. But a few years ago I came across a report from the US called *Reading next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006), which looks at the literacy demands on middle and senior high school students and examines the research to recommend how to develop the reading skills of students. I found this report at the right time: I was just starting to do more work with secondary school teachers and their students and as the report analysed the research it meant that I didn't need to wade through research paper after research paper looking for information about how best to help young people struggling with the reading demands of school. And, it was very readable.

So, if there was a report on reading, was there one on writing? Yes! *Writing next* (Graham & Perin, 2007) also existed and, if anything, was more what I was looking for

as it focused on specific teaching techniques that work in the classroom and it used meta analysis—a statistical technique that determines the consistency and strength of effects of different studies to identify patterns among study results. *Writing next* looked at studies of instructional practice related to writing and highlighted the strongest and most promising ones. I was hooked!

Let me give you an example of how I have found these reports to be useful. A few years ago I was asked to do some work with secondary school content area teachers whose students were struggling with the literacy demands of the subjects they taught. Having not worked with this group of teachers before, I checked to see if anyone else had the answer to their problems. To my delight I came across *What content-area teachers should know about adolescent literacy* (National Institute for Literacy, 2007), a summary of the research in this field and a great starting point for my work in this area.

Last year my big discovery was the work of John Hattie. His book, *Visible learning* (2009), synthesises over eight hundred meta-analyses related to achievement of school students. I can't claim to have read all of Hattie's book or all of the literature reviews and meta-analyses I have come across since first discovering *Reading next*, but I have found it extremely useful to dip in and out of them. They serve to make you reflect on what works in practice and on its relevance to adult education and literacy. And the research done in the areas of children and adolescent literacy impacts on the work and thinking in adult literacy. For example, the report *Adult education literacy instruction: a review of the research* (Kruidenier, MacArthur & Wrigley, 2010) relies heavily, but with discretion, on the research undertaken in children and adolescent literacy, as the body of research in adult literacy is relatively small. The report is



also partly structured around topics established as being the cornerstones of children's reading (National Reading Panel, 2000)—phonemic awareness and word analysis, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

A rethink

Reading such reports has introduced me to new ideas, reconfirmed existing ideas, made me ask questions of myself, helped me rethink my ideas and modify some of them. It has also made me very conscious of the huge gaps in my knowledge. This is obviously what reading is meant to do, but unless there is a need, I don't do it. I do, however, welcome the need arising—well usually!

So an example of how this reading has impacted on my thinking. For some time I have been a keen advocate of inquiry based and problem solving teaching and learning approaches. I tend to incorporate these into most of the programmes that I help to develop. But, after reading Hattie's analysis of teaching strategies and approaches, I have become more careful of when to use these approaches in relation to the desired student outcome. So if I want students to develop new knowledge, then problem based learning alone may not be the best approach; but if I want the outcome to be skill development or understanding of the underlying concepts, then problem based learning is a great way to go.

Evidence and theory

As you can no doubt see, I have been seduced by evidence. But there is so much evidence! Which evidence to use?

If you based a programme of any sort on evidence alone, it is likely to be completely ad hoc. Green (2000), in relation to health education, observes that without 'theoretical principles we risk being submerged by a post-modern morass of empirical evidence, which on its own, can do little to guide practice' (p. 125). This seems to be to be as true for adult and adolescent literacy education as it does for health education. We need to have a strong theoretical base to

hang the evidence on so that we can be critical and can create coherent programmes that work. We need theories that underpin our practice and which guide our reading of evidence, helping us to develop and put into practice programmes that work.

And finally

It concerns me that adult literacy educators don't have the time to dip in and out of the evidence that exists about what *works*, nor easy access to professional learning that supports the development of theoretical understandings and concepts. I don't have any easy answers to either of these issues but I would like to see a way in which we can all continue to develop our knowledge, skills and concepts as professionals.

References

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