

The story behind *My Neighbourhood: literacy in context*

By Jan Hagston

Have you ever wondered what processes the writer of a literacy resource goes through? Jan Hagston describes why she decided to write her new resource, *My Neighbourhood: literacy in context*, and how she developed methods and activities around theories on literacy and applied learning. For a review of *My Neighbourhood: literacy in context*, see the Reviews section of this issue.

From October 2008 to January 2012 I worked as the executive officer of the Victorian Applied Learning Association (VALA). VALA is the peak organisation for applied learning educators. These could be educators of students of any age, from all sectors and subject areas. However, most members of VALA are teachers of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) or similar programs for youth.

During this time I had contact with a range of teachers in VCAL and other youth programmes, some expert at using an applied learning approach, others struggling to develop students' subject knowledge using applied learning. As a literacy educator, I was particularly interested in how students' literacy skills were developed. I observed literacy being developed in the following ways:

1. Embedded within a broader project. This included activities such as organising an end of year event or a fund raising activity or running a small business. In some instances, literacy specific to the tasks was directly taught. In other instances students were expected to acquire the knowledge and skills through doing the tasks.
2. As a separate subject. Tasks relevant to the world outside the classroom provided the context for the activities undertaken. In these instances literacy skills were often directly addressed.
3. In traditional English classes with few links made to the world outside the classroom.

Some questions arose from these observations including: Were students developing literacy skills just by using these skills in a practical context? What about the students who didn't have the literacy skills to do the tasks requiring literacy—what is the best way to assist these students to develop literacy skills? How could students who could already complete the tasks further develop their literacy

skills? What is the place of direct teaching of literacy skills in applied learning?

While working at VALA my time was consumed by the practical aspects of managing multiple projects and tasks and I didn't have time or energy to think further about these questions. I promised myself I would give them further thought when I had time and after finishing with VALA I had the time but found it hard to discipline myself to contemplate anything other than light novels. I felt I would be more motivated to consider these questions if I did so in an applied context and I decided to develop some literacy activities using applied learning as a framework.

So, as I wrote activities, I considered a range of the questions posed above, and consulted some literature along the way. This was a messy process and hard to document so what follows is more linear than what occurred.

What does applied learning mean?

One of the first big questions to tackle was, what does applied learning mean?

To answer this question I turned to some of the literature. I was aware of starting with Dalton (2004) who, in a discussion of the meaning of applied learning, noted that the term 'has little currency in its own right' but 'may be embedded' in other terminology such as 'authentic learning, constructivist learning, experiential learning, situated learning, vocation learning, enterprise learning or learning for work' (p. 8). A number of educational theorists or theories support the concept of applied learning. For example, Dewey wrote of the link between experience and thinking (1916). The constructivists (e.g. D. Jonassen, 1999) talk about the importance of students building knowledge and learning through constructing products and solving problems. Gee (1990) also talks about students being active learners and learning through using their skills in context.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), the state government body with responsibility for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning curriculum, notes that applied learning is ‘often equated to *hands on* or practical learning experiences’ (2011). They propose four key concepts underpinning applied learning:

1. Applied learning emphasises the relevance of what is being learnt to the *real world*, the world outside the classroom.
2. Partnerships between students and their teachers and organisations and individuals outside the classroom need to be made to provide the *real world* contexts in which activities can be undertaken.
3. Applied learning is concerned with the student as a *whole person*—their strengths, weaknesses, interests, experiences, issues, goals, preferred learning styles.
4. Applied learning acknowledges that as part of the transition from school to the post-school world, students should be supported to become more independent and responsible for their own learning.

Also acknowledged in the VCAA’s Applied Learning information sheet (2011) is that theory and application are equally important with context, supplying the links between them. ‘The theoretical understandings and knowledge required to complete a task will be drawn out from the context, which also provides the opportunity to use and apply what has been learnt’ (2011). Tout and Motteram (2006) also comment on the equal importance of theory and practice in applied learning, noting that in applied learning ‘the starting point will often be the context and application (projects, investigations, and the like)—not the theory and abstract skills’ (p. 13).

According to the VCAA these key concepts underpin eight principles of applied learning. The next thing for me was to consider how the key concepts and principles impacted on teaching. Given the work I had been doing over the previous three years, some thought had gone into this. Table 1 is a summary of some of that thinking.

Achieving literacy skill development

But, not only did I need to think about applied learning, I also needed to consider how best to achieve literacy skill development in the activities I was writing. I tend to dip into a range of theories and ideas without being an advocate for any one of them. At the recent (2012) ACAL conference, O’Maley and Matheson used a range of quotes from different theorists in their workshop. I can identify a number of

these people as impacting on my understanding and view of literacy. These include Gee, Luke and Freebody, the New London Group, Barton and Hamilton. Others, like Kamler, could be added to the list of people who have influenced how I see literacy.

In the last few years I have also read a number of meta-analyses of research about what is effective in developing literacy skills (e.g. Graham and Perin, 2007; Graham & Hebert, 2010; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Kamil et al, 2008; Kruidenier et al, 2010). Although some of these are focused on adolescent literacy there seems to be some relevance to adult literacy teaching.

It isn’t possible to summarise these reports here but some of the things I took from them include:

- the need to motivate and engage learners
- the importance of vocabulary in both reading and writing and the need to provide explicit vocabulary instruction
- the need to provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction
- the importance of providing opportunities to discuss the meaning of texts
- writing is likely to increase reading and comprehension skills.

With all these things in mind—but not necessarily all at the same time, I wrote a number of literacy activities around the theme of the neighbourhood. These activities have been combined into a resource, *My neighbourhood: literacy in context*.

Did I achieve my goal?

In part. I read and considered some of the literature available to me, which helped me to more clearly articulate the questions I wanted to answer and to formulate ideas about how to use applied learning as a framework for literacy development.

I think I have addressed most of the applied learning principles—but across all the activities not in each of them. I didn’t attempt to address the principle about assessment although the completed activities could be included in students’ portfolios.

As stated in the introduction to the resource, it is ‘based on the premise that the best way to develop skills is to learn and use them in context’ (Hagston, 2012, p. 1). The neighbourhood provides the context for the activities. As a context it is literacy rich, requires making some connections

Table 1: Principles of applied learning and implications for teaching

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1. *Start where learners are at.*

There is a need to take time to get to know the students—their interests, issues and skills. Activities should start from students’ knowledge and experience and build on this.
 2. *Negotiate the curriculum.*

Negotiating the curriculum assists students to take responsibility for their learning. Negotiation is also a two way process and while teachers need to take account of students’ interests and needs, students need to realise teachers have to take into account curriculum considerations, available expertise, financial and time constraints, etc.
 3. *Share knowledge and recognise the knowledge of students.*

All students bring to the learning situation knowledge and experiences. Teachers aren’t the font of all knowledge and opportunities should be provided for students to collaborate and to share their knowledge and experience as well as their reflections.
 4. *Connect with communities and real life experiences.*

This requires forming partnerships with people and organisations in the community so that students can undertake *real world* activities in out-of-school contexts. These *real world* activities tend to engage students as they have meaning and purpose in the broader community. The theory and skills behind what is being done are drawn out of the practical context and are, therefore, likely to be more meaningful for the student. *Real world* activities are also likely to require the integration of skills and knowledge from different subject areas. Students are expected to meet the expectations of those in the community, including work places, which is likely to have a positive impact on students’ behaviours and learning.
 5. *Build resilience, confidence and self-worth—consider the whole person.*

This can be facilitated in a range of ways such as:

 - starting where the students are at and providing opportunities to share knowledge, expertise and experiences.
 - providing opportunities for students to work in different ways to take account of their preferred learning styles.
 - providing opportunities for success for all students and publicly celebrating their achievements.
 - taking into account students’ personal strengths, interests, goals, previous experiences and preferred ways of learning.
 6. *Integrate learning. Learning should reflect the integration of skills and knowledge that occurs in real life tasks.*

Don’t artificially separate learning into discrete sets of unconnected skills. Using projects and *real world* activities facilitates integrated learning as the focus is on the skills and knowledge required for the project or activity. This is likely to require teachers from different subject areas to work together.
 7. *Everyone learns differently. Value and promote different learning styles.*

Provide different learning options that cater for learners with different learning styles. This can also be used this as an opportunity to develop understanding of how others learn.
 8. *Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best fits the learning content and context.*

Use different assessment tools for different activities. Students should become aware of the importance of collecting evidence to demonstrate skills and encouraged to collect this evidence (e.g. photos, diaries, reflections). This is a great way for students to begin to be responsible for their own learning.
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with the community, and, to function within it, requires the integration of skills from different subject areas (including numeracy). The activities attempt to build on the students’ existing knowledge and experiences and take into account different learning styles.

There is also an attempt to engage students, to provide activities to develop their vocabulary and writing skills and to have them critically analyse and discuss texts.

Is there enough direct teaching to further develop literacy

skills? I’m not sure. The activities try to provide a structure to support the development of a range of literacy skills and skill sheets and links are supplied to support students in some skill areas and teachers are encouraged to delve into other resources and use their own knowledge and expertise. Perhaps working on this is the challenge for my next set of activities!

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