

Action research – creative partnerships in learning and teaching

Dr Linda Gibson-Langford
Teacher Librarian
The King's School
Sydney, Australia

Teachers need to rigorously and systematically reflect on their practice and such reflection can be most effective within collaborative cultures. Within the context of action research, centred on how literature can enrich students' world views, this paper offers an observation on collaboration as intense professional enrichment.

The action research gave clear evidence that literature can shape and enrich boys' understandings of masculinities. It also highlighted the power of collaboration in learning and teaching. As a consequence of this research, the teacher librarian and the Head of English developed trust and appreciation of each others' craft knowledge and engaged in significant risk-taking, through creating, sharing and using their knowledge.

collaboration, action research, knowledge creation, knowledge sharing

Enhancing learning through action research – from collaboration to collaboration

As teacher librarians, we are cognisant of the influential role of literature in the development of critical thinking (Oatley, 2008; Hogan, 2003) and it is acknowledged that we have a thorough understanding of how to promote and foster literacies (ALIA & ASLA, 2004). By using this knowledge to guide students' selection of reading/ listening or viewing material, we enable them to deepen and broaden their world views. Moreover, when combining our knowledge and skill set with that of our colleagues, experiences are created which enhance learning for both teachers and students.

The Language Arts curriculum offers teacher librarians and teachers rich opportunities for collaboration in creating stimulating learning and teaching experiences. We share with our English teaching colleagues the knowledge, skills and desire to create motivating reading, viewing and listening experiences in the hope of encouraging in our students heightened cultural and social awareness and hence, sensitivity to their world (IFLA/UNESCO School Library Manifesto, 2006). Thus, it would seem a natural partnership for English teachers and teacher librarians to work in an environment where sharing tacit professional knowledge leads to co-creation of learning activities that enrich and enhance their students' world views. However, the benefit of such a partnership is often disregarded in the daily rush of the school day, becoming more of an *ad hoc* response to needs, as opposed to creative and intentional design for understanding.

Engaging in collaborative practice, believing in evidence-based practice, and committing to continuous research provide one set of strategies by which teacher librarians and teachers can create and share their knowledge-of-practice, knowledge-for-practice, and knowledge-in-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Through choosing action research as an approach, collaborative partnerships between teacher librarians and classroom teachers have not only a scaffold for thinking critically and creatively, but both sets of stakeholders are offered a chance for transforming intuitive practice into intentional and informed practice, thereby

making explicit teachers' tacit knowledge. This, in turn, leads to the continuous development of a learning community (Gibson-Langford, 2006). Time, unfortunately, can often subvert good intentions, but action research offers a practical solution in which time can take a 'back seat'. The outcome, as Laycock (2007 p. 13) observes, 'can be amazingly rewarding, both professionally and personally. In the process of undertaking action research, teachers become learners and inevitably improve their professional disposition as they continually develop mastery of their craft'.

Creating the partnership

Cooperative planning is often confused with collaboration. The difference can be as simple as carrying out mutually agreed tasks, as in the former, or as complex as sharing tacit knowledge whilst in the process of creating new knowledge, as in the latter (Gibson-Langford, 2008).

Collaboration should not be dismissed as something that happens as an outcome of working together. It is a powerful force, a process of shared creation generated within a shared space; that part of working together when talking turns to innovative thinking and change (Schrage, 1995). Conceptually, collaboration has a deep intellectual and emotional edge. It relies on the art of transforming tacit knowledge (that which is buried deep inside each person) into explicit knowledge (that which can readily be documented) and this relies on the quality of relationships (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995; Prusak 1997, Tsoukas 1996). Relationships centre on people - the one commonality across any interpretation of collaboration, and relationships need to be nurtured. Time, a valuable asset in a teaching world, is needed for such nurturing. However, due to the particularly isolating environment of teaching (Rothberg, 1985), time can thwart the nurturing process.

Ironically, teachers learn best in a social context, yet have limited opportunities to learn together. As identified in the study into how teachers' learning communities create, share and use knowledge (see appendix 1), it was clear that teachers want to talk - to communicate, to participate in critical dialogue, and to genuinely work at a level deeper than mere cooperative planning and teaching. Importantly, the quality of that first experience will in turn determine if the collaborative moment is alive, transforming the relationship from *coblaboration* (Perkins, 2003) to cooperative sharing to collaborative intent.

Unfortunately, as Huberman notes (1993, p34), the creativity that sparks collaboration amongst teachers is sparse because 'collaborative planning and execution [are] not grafted onto a pre-existing web of dense social interactions'. For teachers to move from *coblaboration* to collaboration requires planned structures and processes that are dedicated to facilitating shared creation. These structures and processes must be built on the premise that teachers' knowledge is valued and valuable (Hord, 1997). Teachers need structures that allow them to engage in deep conversation, to reflect on their practice, to create, to **trial and to observe new ideas in action**; they need processes that ensure that feedback is both critical and often, that appreciative behaviours are embedded into the cultural consciousness and that trust in oneself is reflected in how the community trusts each other. Teachers need, as Schrage (1995) suggests, a shared space – *a table napkin* - both symbolic and existent, where imagination, design and innovation are unencumbered by the superficiality of collegiality and cooperation; a place in which ideas are outlined, challenged, and re-created. These social interactions are essential in the deep work of collaboration as is valuing diversity of ideas,

through appreciating and fostering cognitive and creative dissonance. John-Steiner (2000, p. 6) observes that ‘Collaboration thrives on diversity of perspectives and constructive dialogue between individuals negotiating their differences while creating their shared voices and visions’. Diversity of perspectives relies on a safe environment as Gibson-Langford & Laycock (2007, p.3) note, ‘every single person wants to share their knowledge in some way; yet they also want to protect their ideas ... fear of ridicule is often cited as the more pressing. Sensitivity is required ... this requires partnerships steeped in empathy’ with a shared moral purpose.

And what was the moral purpose that brought the Head of English and the teacher librarian to enter into a joint action research project? Passion for investigating practice? Engaging in constructive dialogue? Facilitating the life choices of students? All of the above! What were the shared space and the table napkin? – action research and the belief that literature has the potential to transform world views.

A brief overview of the study

Whilst this study was undertaken at a boys’ school in Sydney, Australia, it was part of a much larger international action research project conducted under the auspices of the International Boys’ Schools Coalition (IBSC). A team of thirteen teachers and teacher librarians across six countries shared resources, ideas, data collecting instruments, and conversation over a year, through Web 2 social networking tools (wiki, Skype, Google documents) and face-to-face events. Whilst acknowledging the unique nature of the researchers’ contexts, the research team agreed to a common question, ‘How can literature enrich and enhance boys’ understandings of masculinities?’

As indicated, although part of a wider project, at the school level this study became a powerful collaborative force in which the Head of English and the teacher librarian (the researchers) could safely outline, imagine, design, change and work on ideas that mattered to each partner; a shared space in which to engage in deep conversation of knowledge-of-practice and knowledge-for-practice. This particular study can be accessed at http://docs.google.com/View?id=dfqh2md5_7gzhrsfft

Assumptions

Before both teacher and teacher librarian could engage in this collaborative project, they needed to share a common purpose. They discussed their assumptions and agreed that through facilitating boys' engagement in reading and viewing and listening to all kinds of stories in order to enrich and enhance their understanding of human behaviour and the human heart, they would also enrich their world view of manhood. Therefore they assumed that, by studying literature which had intriguing male characters who were heroic yet non-heroic, who were champions yet unassuming classmates, and who were in tune with their emotions, boys would have a broader and richer understanding of masculinities. The researchers also assumed that planned interventions to disrupt the status quo would see a change in the way the boys’ perceived masculinities.

Research approach

Action research was the ideal approach for this project, not only through developing essential reflective practice within the goal of effecting positive changes in improving student outcomes (Mills, 2002), but also in developing a stronger and deeper collaborative relationship between the teacher and the teacher librarian. A literature review was undertaken prior to commencement of the action research and continued throughout the research period.

Design

The research was designed to coincide with the commencement of a unit of study entitled *Introduction to Shakespeare*. The class teacher suggested *The Merchant of Venice* and the teacher librarian was able to respond with a graphic novel of the play, a modern interpretation including a first act that was modified to quickly arrive at the essence of the conflict whilst the second act reverted to Shakespeare's original text. Other texts in the unit would include a simplified story of the play, selected film scenes from various versions of *The Merchant of Venice* and a cartoon focussed on male /female feelings (see appendix 3). The focus was clearly established, allowing for a 10 week study into boys' attitudes to 'the masculine' as well as to observe reactions to texts and activities that essentially subverted the stereotypical view of masculinities.

An essential element of building this research community was rapport. The boys were at ease with their peers as well as with their teacher and teacher librarian. They felt comfortable and enabled to speak their mind. The class culture was based on respecting diversity of perspectives and constructive dialogue; essential behaviours for collaboration.

Participants

The participants were gifted Year 8 English students, ranging in age from 12-14. It was felt that this was the most impressionable age for forming views about manhood and, both teacher librarian and class teacher (Head of English), intuited that these boys would rise to the challenges presented by the selected texts. Thus, the participants were chosen for their strong critical thinking skills, their maturity in expression, as well as their ability to confidently handle higher order discussions, even when experiencing cognitive and affective dissonance. Permissions were sought for participation as well as the publishing of any data, including images.

Texts

Initially, the boys read a simplified version of the *The Merchant of Venice* (Lamb (1807), 2004). Analysis and discussion of stereotypes followed prior to the boys' introduction to the graphic novel of the play (Hinds, 2007). Once the boys had had the opportunity to form their own views about each character, specific controversial ideas and texts, that subverted the stereotypical perspective on masculinities, were introduced into the class discussions.

Data Collection

Several data collection techniques were used including surveys, researcher / teacher observations, questionnaires, reflection activities, debate and discussions. Some of the discussions were filmed.

Initially, the boys engaged in intense foregrounding activities. They were asked their views on male or female stereotypes and were also given a survey (see appendix 2) in which the participants provided their interpretation of what is a man, responding to an hierarchy of questions. Whole lessons were given over to these initial and intense discussions on manhood and masculinities.

The boys then began their study of *The Merchant of Venice*, reading the simplified story before they were given the graphic novel version. Various activities ranged from a visual analysis of characters through to a detailed analysis of the words spoken by selected characters. Throughout these activities, discussion came back to how the characters conformed / did not conform to the male / female stereotype. Finally, each group was given one character to critically analyse in terms of how he /she conformed / did not conform to the stereotypical portrayal. They were tasked with ensuring they could back up their comments with supporting evidence from the text.

The boys were then introduced to several film excerpts from three different versions of *The Merchant of Venice*, each focussed on the same scenes: sealing of the deal (Act 1 Scene iii) and the courtroom (Act 4 Scene i), concluding with the more modern version (Brokaw & Cowan, 2004). The discussion that followed was filmed.

As a final activity, an image of a half boy/half girl was distributed. The image was surrounded by seven comments from both a female and male perspective (eg. for every boy for whom competition is the only way to prove his masculinity, there is a girl who is called unfeminine when she competes). The boys were asked to reflect on the image's message in relation to the text studied. They were asked to decide if the message was relevant to the text and in what way, to consider how their ideas connected / did not connect to their understanding of the text and to reflect on how *The Merchant of Venice* helped / did not help them understand or question stereotypes?

At this point, particularly probing questions were asked of the boys to determine if there had been a shift in their view. All were prepared to give their honest views, and were prepared to defend their views in the face of challenges from other students, as well as their teachers.

Analysis and summary of findings

Prior to the deliberate disruption to the established view of what a man is, the boys in this study had a fairly similar hegemonic perspective on the stereotypical male in their school and within the broader community culture. Teacher observations and student comments, in the form of written responses and recorded discussions, illustrated that the activities within the study broadened the boys' understanding of masculinities and challenged the established hegemonic view of what it is to be a man. Shifts in the boys' perceptions occurred as they shared their thoughts on masculinities, moving from an essentialist view to a more expansive understanding, with a preference for the non-hegemonic reality.

Did the study of the *Merchant of Venice* enhance or enrich their understanding of masculinities? Teacher observation would say "yes" based on the reflective nature of the final discussion. The boys probed areas of masculinities that went beyond teacher

expectations for this age group. Student responses, on the other hand, indicated that their views were not changed, but that they were, as one boy noted, “more comfortable with the idea that stereotypical maleness is not something they need to ascribe to” and that the hegemonic perspective, as strong as it is in their cultural frame, is not everything; that the “football hero can also enjoy and love dance.”

Several of the boys stated that *The Merchant of Venice* had “provided a number of examples by which to measure their own sense of masculinity”. One participant stated eloquently what the greater majority expressed, “I had not thought about masculinities and conformity. At the start of term, I defined being male as having an income, a family, a business. Shakespeare placed Portia in these roles - made me think of the different qualities of a person, not as a label!” Another participant summed up that he needs to be wary of “conforming to the prevailing view of maleness” in a bid “to avoid losing my individuality”. Yet another participant noted that “a man is not one who conforms [and] that being different was a hallmark of being masculine or feminine”.

A final comment from the study, a blend of participant voices, is encouraging, as it clearly demonstrates the central role of literature in enriching the boys’ understanding of Self.

Masculinity includes mercy. Males should embrace their feminine qualities and become better rounded ... males do not have to hide their feelings; each of the male characters altered my view of males – we have the right to be vulnerable, to be romantic, to be emotional, to be the non-dominant partner. The stereotype is flawed and unjust.

Boys indeed heed, for the most part, what the dominating culture depicts, and grow to be men. Assuming that boys model manhood on what they see, hear, and view in the mass media, then it can also be assumed that what they read has an effect on how they interpret masculinity, and indeed, masculinities.

Discussion and implication for the future

In a school setting, action research, in the main, takes what is not obvious to the student or teacher and disrupts the primary perspective to interrogate a phenomenon more deeply and systematically. In this instance, research conducted to explore the role of literature in enhancing and enriching boys’ understanding of masculinities indicated that literature has a powerful responsibility in students’ development of critical thinking and in shaping personal and societal perspectives (Nodelman, 2002; Bereska, 2003; Dutro, 2002; Lee, 2003; Young, 2001).

As teachers, we were overwhelmed by the boys’ sensitivities and ability to engage in intense discussions that we once felt were beyond their years. Their ability to respect diversity of perspectives, as well as their frankness, was indicative of the trust and appreciation they had for one another as well as their teacher and teacher librarian. The collaborative moment had transformed into a collaborative culture.

Certainly, we will be exploring texts that subvert the hegemonic view of masculinities with our future Year 8 students. Building the collaborative culture will be foremost in our

minds as we build trust and respect for ideas and model critical dialogue and critical feedback. We will deliberately incorporate activities in our quest to assist our boys in understanding how 'constructions of male and female depend on each other' (Khan & Walcholz, 2006) and to enhance their understanding of masculinities as socially constructed realities, relative to what is deemed subordinate (including femininities) as well as marginalised (Connell, 2005). This action research has opened up the way for risk-taking.

Importance and interest of the study

Emerging from this action research was the causal understanding that relationship building is fundamental to deep collaboration and that collaboration leads to intense periods of knowledge sharing and, as importantly, the co-creation of knowledge. Collaboration has taken us, as teachers, deeper into conversation, risk-taking, and trialing new ideas and further away from collaboration. For example, during the development, implementation and evaluation of the research project, collaboration between teacher and teacher librarian was facilitated by respect and admiration for each other's differences, which lead to working creatively, and being flexible in approach whilst at the same time maintaining an open and easy relationship. It was not uncommon to receive late evening emails or telephone calls with changes to the next day's approach - sometimes a complete turnaround to what had been discussed that day. The hierarchical lines were blurred as teacher librarian and Head of English engaged in no less a creative and challenging activity than did the boys.

Teacher librarians are teachers. Their pedagogy has firm roots in evidence-based practice; continuously learning, sharing and creating new knowledge in *genuine* collaborative experiences with fellow teachers and students for the ultimate betterment of student learning. Perhaps action research can be viewed as a pedagogical model as well as a means for do-able evidence gathering. With its focus on relationships, action research *contributes* to a more meaningful professional experience for teachers, no matter their roles in the school.

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Biographical note

Linda completed her doctoral study in how teachers create, share and use their professional knowledge to create and sustain learning communities. She has continued to contribute to the discussion on collaborative cultures. Her continued commitment to collaborative inquiry is evidenced in the recent completion of an action research project on behalf of the International Boys' Schools Coalition. Currently Linda is collaborating on a research study into the efficacy of an international research model in which educators collaborate using Web 2 technologies as their primary means of sharing and creating knowledge.

Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others are referenced.

Appendix 1

Table 1. Guiding principles for developing teachers' learning community

(Linda Gibson-Langford 2006 p. 219)

Knowledge creation

- Knowledge is created when teachers learn together
- Knowledge is created when teachers are involved in critical dialogue.
- Knowledge is created when teachers further their study.
- Knowledge is created when teachers are appreciated.
- Knowledge is created when teachers' moral purpose is strong.
- Knowledge is created through serious play and through reflective practice.

Knowledge sharing

- Teachers prefer to share their knowledge in a social context.
- Teachers share their knowledge with reflective/ critical friends.
- Teachers share their knowledge when feedback is frequent and critical.
- Teachers need time to share their knowledge.
- Teachers' credibility influences how they share their knowledge.
- Teachers prefer informal structures when sharing their knowledge.
- Reflective practice enables knowledge sharing.

Knowledge use

- Teachers commit to new ideas that demonstrate relative and economic advantage.
- Level of abstraction is important to the adoption of new ideas.
- Teachers adopt new ideas through trialling.
- Observing new ideas in action influences how teachers' use knowledge.
- Teachers use new ideas that are deemed effective

Appendix 2

IBSC Action Research Project 2008-2009

Initial Survey

1. What three qualities do you admire in your male friends?
2. What are the three most important things in being a man?
3. From your reading or viewing, identify a male character that best represents your idea of manhood.

Character name _____

Name of film / TV show / Novel _____

List 2 reasons for your choice.

4. What do you think a man should value?
5. What types of jobs should a man have? List 3.
6. What types of jobs are unsuitable for a man? List 3
7. List 3 difficulties faced by being a man in today's society.
8. List 3 advantages of being a man in today's society.
9. Who is the most influential man in your life?
10. In what way does this man influence you?
11. What words describe your ideal man?
12. What do you think masculinity is?
13. What does manhood mean to you?