Reading development within and across communities of practice: Focusing on the middle years of school: Significance of this study

Author
Rossow, Deborah

Published
2006

Book Title
I think I can! 2006: CALLCS Research Higher Degree Students Sharing Their Work

Copyright Statement
Copyright 2006 Griffith University.

Downloaded from
http://hdl.handle.net/10072/11662

Link to published version
http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/callcs/
My confirmation seminar took place in March 2005. My accompanying confirmation paper was quite lengthy - 90 pages – which was indicative of both where I was in my learning journey and my tendency towards verbosity. Although I am now a year ahead in my learning journey, it has continued to revolve around reading, thinking, writing, and discussing my thoughts, which ultimately lead to rereading, reading further, rethinking and rewriting. With cycles of confusion and enlightenment, these processes seem to be part of the ‘reality’ of undertaking a higher research degree. Since one of the key elements of undertaking a research degree is justifying the significance for your area of study, I have selected and rewritten that section of my confirmation paper. Please know that you are most welcome to contact me if you would like a copy of my full confirmation paper and/or seminar. I am most willing to share my work and am open to receiving peer feedback.

In my case, I arrived at Griffith University with an area of personal and professional interest regarding literacy learning and teaching about which I wanted to gain further insights. Since higher research degrees are required to add something new to the existing field, I soon realised that research into a personal/professional area of interest may not achieve this goal for me. Since literacy has been an area much researched for many years, I perceived the chances of finding anything that had not already been investigated to be an impossible task. Also while I may not have encountered literature about particular topics, I realised that did not mean that they did not exist. I also came to the realisation that I may have misunderstood what is meant by the notion of research must add to the existing field. Subsequent discussions with my supervisors and colleagues have drawn to my attention that there are a number of ways in which higher degree students can contribute to their field.

Some of the ways in which contributions may be made to the field and, therefore, significance shown are empirically, conceptually-theoretically, and methodologically. These three areas can be utilised to formulate a framework for investigating and justifying the significance for any higher degree research. Firstly, empirical sources may be drawn upon and analysed to discern areas of concern and gaps. In my case, I accessed research data about students’ reading results. My critique of these data suggested the need for further investigation of several areas including data aggregation methods, and clarification of which students experience difficulties with reading. Secondly, conceptual and theoretical sources need to be examined. I read a large number of mainstream media reports, research publications (reports and papers) and theoretical documents to gain as comprehensive as possible an insight into what existed in the literacy field. Critiquing these notions allowed me to raise questions that I shaped into areas requiring further research. Finally, methodological sources may be examined. At the point of my confirmation, I did not consider that there were potential methodological notions that I would be employing that would be extending upon current methods used to research literacy. Subsequently, I have become aware that I am using data collection and analysis methods that have not been used extensively in literacy research.

I hope what I have provided above and in my attached article aid you in investigating and justifying the significance of your area of research. Moreover, the best advice I can give to anyone preparing for their confirmation is:

- draw upon empirical, conceptual-theoretical and/or methodological sources to substantiate the significance of your research area
• accept that you are not expected to know everything
• be open and willing to consider alternative views
• use your presentation as a way for the attendees to get to know you and your research area
• know your work so that you can talk around and to the PowerPoint presentation rather than resorting to reading which interrupts the connection you make with your audience

I wish you all the very best with your research.

Deborah Rossow
d.rossow@griffith.edu.au
Reading Development Within and Across Communities Of Practice: Focusing on the middle years of school:

Significance of this Study

Deborah Rossow

Centre for Applied Language, Literacy & Communication Studies
Griffith University

Introduction
The research study discussed here proposes to investigate the construction of readers and reading practices in the middle years of school, both within and across a range of in-school and out-of-school communities of practices. This research is significant on two fronts. Firstly, I argue that empirical sources, reading achievement data, substantiate the ongoing need for research of readers as individuals who are members of a number of communities. Secondly, I propose that this study will provide conceptual-theoretical advances in the field of literacy pedagogy. Although methodological sources could be examined to substantiate the significance of my study, at this point in time, I do not consider that my methodological methods will extend upon literacy research methods.

Reading Achievement Data
Although much research has been conducted on reading which may lead to assumptions that there is no space for further research, I propose that there are areas in the field which require reconsideration and, therefore, further attention. Within the following, I outline why I perceive it is both timely and warranted to investigate readers as individuals who are members of a number of communities.

Demands for improved literacy outcomes for ‘all’ students are often heard within mainstream media as well as within academic and political arenas. In the most recent proclamations of a ‘national reading crisis’(Lovat, 2004; McGrath, 2004; Nelson, 2004a, 2004b), reading achievement data has been utilised to support the call for changes in literacy teacher training and reading teaching policies and practices.
Within these arenas, reading achievement data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004; Lokan, Greenwood, & Cresswell, 2001), the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) (Rothman & McMillan, 2003), and National School English Literacy Survey (Department of Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1997a, 1997b) has been used to illustrate that many students (figures quoted by Buckingham (2004), Cole (2004), Editorial (2004), Kemp (2004), Maiden (2004), and Peake (2004) ranged from 10% to 30%) are not succeeding in reading. Analysis of the original reading achievement data sources, substantiate claims that a proportion of students experience difficulties in reading. Furthermore, significant differences in reading performances between particular groups of students: males and females (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004; Department of Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1997a, 1997b; Rothman & McMillan, 2003); indigenous and non-indigenous (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004; Department of Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1997a, 1997b; Rothman & McMillan, 2003); non-English and English speaking backgrounds (Department of Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1997a, 1997b; Rothman & McMillan, 2003); low, medium and high socio-economic groups (Department of Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1997a, 1997b; Rothman & McMillan, 2003); rural and urban (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2004), are evidenced. These findings substantiate that particular groups of students are experiencing difficulties in reading and that these particular groups should be targeted for further research and support in reading.

I argue, however, for a shift away from research on groups towards attending to readers as individuals who are members of multiple communities. Specifically, I perceive the focus on particular groups to be problematic as it may lead to simplistic and potentially inaccurate representation of individual member’s performance (Luke, Woods, Land, Bahr, & McFarland, 2002). For example, Luke et al. (Luke et al., 2002) identified issues with the testing devices including their validity, cultural fairness and reliability. In addition, I posit that disaggregating data in accordance with particular groups may lead to homogenisation of individuals to categories and facilitate the construction of overgeneralisations which attribute to the development of inaccurate stereotypical perceptions of readers. Furthermore, homogenised categories provide a simplistic view which fails to acknowledge the complexities of how elements such as
poverty work with gender and/or race to deny some individuals access to quality schooling. I have observed homogenised understandings of readers resulting in some schools adopting reading programs to cater for particular groups of students, for example, male students. Indeed some males, but certainly not all males, experience difficulties reading. Therefore, the need for a reading program for males (or any particular group) of readers is not warranted. Furthermore, I perceive that focusing on particular groups fails to acknowledge the complexities involved including that readers may be members of two or more identified ‘at risk’ groups, therein, increasing the likelihood of them experiencing reading difficulties. In addition, I argue that focusing on ‘at risk’ groups is simplistic as it fails to acknowledge the complexities involved in becoming a reader who can participate competently in a range of communities of practice. I propose that research of readers as members of a number of communities is warranted at this point in time to challenge and extend upon existing perceptions of readers as evidenced through reading achievement data.

However, at this point, I need to clarify that I am not subscribing to a view of the individual as a separate autonomous being and reading as an individual cognitive activity. My study is underpinned by sociocultural views of learning and identity. Building upon Vygotsky’s (1962; 1981) work, sociocultural perspectives claim that “human action, on both the social and individual planes, is mediated by tools and signs” that are part of people’s social life and culture (Wertsch, 1991, p.19). Moreover, people are viewed as “cultural participants, living in a particular community at a specific time in history” (Rogoff, 2003). These constructs of learning and identity, therefore, cannot be understood independently of the community in which individuals participate. Furthermore, sociocultural views enable the consideration of reading as practices that are constructed over time and spaces (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002).

In summary, I propose that it is timely and warranted for my study which will investigate readers as individuals who participate, and are constructed through engagement, in reading in a number of in-school and out-of-school communities of practice.
Conceptual –Theoretical Significance
This research is also significant in that it extents conceptual-theoretical notions in the field of literacy. In my study, I examine research that considers reading to be situated within specific contexts, rather than a generalisable capability. Therein, I propose to illustrate that my research is situated in an area of reading that has received limited attention to date. Through the following analysis, I clarify how my research will add to the existing field of knowledge.

Situated Perspective of Reading
Research over the last couple of decades has suggested literacy development to be contextually bound to the community of participation (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Heap, 1991; Heath, 1983; Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland, & Reid, 2002; Li, 2001; Thomson, 2003). Moreover, a situated perspective on reading provides clarification about why what counts as good reading differs from context to context (Heap, 1991). Disparities between contextual notions of what constitutes ‘good’ reading practices are determinant upon behaviours valued within each community of participation. Furthermore, “the social organisation of activities mediates the learning, and teaching, of reading” shapes what counts as ‘good’ reading and the acculturation of readers in different ways in different communities (Heap, 1991, p.120). Studies of literacy as situated practice have revealed where students have been exposed to literate behaviours similar to school valued literate behaviours; their potential for literacy learning was enhanced. Meanwhile, students with different literate experiences, values and behaviours experienced difficulties in becoming literate in the school context. For example, Heath (1983), Henderson (2004), and Thomson (2003) found there was a tendency to view students with literacy experiences, values and behaviours that differed from school-valued practices as deficit or ‘at risk’, rather than different.

Once again, particular groups of readers are identified as either advantaged or ‘at risk’. The ‘at risk’ group, in this instance, consists of any individual whose home-community reading experiences do not ‘match’ the reading practices valued in schools. Again, I argue that focusing on this mismatched ‘at risk’ group would be a simplistic approach to addressing this concern as it could lead to focusing on changing familial reading practices, and therefore fail to acknowledge the
complexities involved in becoming a reader who can participate competently in a number of communities. Further investigation of individuals as readers and how they develop reading competency in their various communities is warranted because further insights are needed into the complexities that shape readers differently.

**Boundary Crossing – Transfer of Reading**

The situated perspective of reading purports that boundaries exist around each community of participation. When I consider that readers are members of multiple communities in which they read, I perceive this bounded view of reading to be problematic in that it fails to explain how readers may become competent readers within multiple communities at the same time.

A number of studies including Barton and Hamilton (1998), Haas Dyson (2001) Hill (1997), Hill et al. (2002), Leseman and de Jong (1998), McNaughton (1995) and Thomson (2003) have investigated language and literacy within home and school contexts. However, the focus has been primarily on identifying how language and literacy practices differ from those valued in schools and how individuals’ diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences lead to some being advantaged and others disadvantaged. While these studies substantiate the situated literacy perspective and the bounded notion of literacy, they fail to provide much insight into how individuals transfer their reading understandings and skills from one context to another.

However, I posit that the situated view of reading, by defining reading to be a socially and contextually constructed practice, challenges the idea of reading being a generalisable individualistic commodity that transfers readily across contexts. Supporters of the generalisable individualistic view of reading have claimed that, since reading matter permeates society, individuals can easily be expected to transfer their reading capabilities across contexts (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996; Perkins & Salomon, 1989). This claim, however, is not supported by research. In fact, despite the masses of available reading research, reading transfer appears to have received limited attention. I argue that this largely unmapped area requires investigation as it may assist educators in facilitating more effective reading pedagogy for all students.
Moreover, I argue that it is crucial that educators and academics gain insights into how reading is transferred across contexts as the increasing diversity of students, their communities and the texts which they have available to read play a critical role in the learning and teaching of reading. If as Gee (1990) proposed that the problematic nature of reading transfer is due to a member of a community of practice needing to appropriate each community’s ways of using literacies and the associated discourse, then educators need insights into how reading transfer is achieved and how they may assist their students in achieving this.

Conclusion
In drawing together the above-mentioned areas, I identify several ways in which my current research project is significant. Firstly, although available reading achievement data indicate that there are particular groups who consistently experience difficulties in reading, attention to these groups fail to provide an adequate understanding of how to address the needs of individuals who are members of many communities at the same time. Therefore, I propose that it is timely and warranted for my study to investigate readers as individuals who participate, and are constructed through such engagement, in reading in a number of in-school and out-of-school communities of practice. In the second instance, the situated perspective of reading specify that readers may be identified as either capable or deficit dependent upon whether community values that shape reading and reading practices ‘match’ or ‘don’t match’. I argue that focusing on investigating or enhancing the potentials for the mismatched, thereby considered the ‘at risk’, group would be a simplistic approach to addressing this concern. For example, it could lead to attending to changing familial reading practices, thereby failing to acknowledge the complexities involved in becoming a reader who can participate competently in a number of communities. From this theoretical stance, I propose that further investigation of individuals as readers and how they develop reading competency in their various communities is warranted. Therein, I perceive my research project can extend upon the existing understandings in this field. Thirdly, the situated perspective on reading signifies boundaries exist around communities which may inhibit the transfer of reading across communities. Despite the masses of available reading research, reading transfer appears to have received limited attention; therefore, is a largely unmapped area. I perceive that my research project will provide conceptual-theoretical advances in this identified gap in
the literacy field. As mentioned above, I have not explored methodological significance as I do not consider that I will be extending upon literacy research methods in that area.

References


