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Children as advocates – The potential of using social media in the early and primary years

Beryl Exley, Linda-Dianne Willis and Margaret McCosker

We three authors come to this paper as teachers of a few decades of experience. In our professional lives, we often discuss the notion of advocacy. Sometimes we frame our discussions from the viewpoint of the teacher as an advocate for children however, on this occasion we turn our talk to children as advocates for causes that matter to them. We think that teachers have an important role to play in preparing children as capable and accomplished advocates, both in their childhood and also in later life. We acknowledge that the ability to advocate is a skill for effecting one's life choices and life chances (Janks, 2010). In this new era of the 'digital turn' (Mills, 2010) and web 2.0 technology (Jenkins, 2009), we are also curious about the potential of using social media for facilitating these ends in the early and primary years.

Pedagogic rights

Our foundational thinking about children as advocates is influenced by Basil Bernstein's (2000) notion of pedagogic rights (see also Exley & Willis, 2016). He challenges educators to think more broadly about the outcomes of schooling, and what a child who has been institutionalised for 12 or more years of their first 18 years of life can rightfully expect as their 'take-away' knowledge and skill set. Bernstein conceived of three interrelated pedagogic rights:

- the right of individual enhancement;
- the right of social inclusion; and
- the right of political participation.

Bernstein's pedagogic rights are bold claims, but all three resonate with each of us. We support the idea that schooling should enhance an individual's personal horizons via the means of new access and thus new possibilities of critical understanding (Bernstein, 2000). We also support the idea that schooling should guarantee that all children are included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally, including the right to be autonomous (Bernstein, 2000). As well, we support the idea that schooling should prepare children to participate

in civic debate and practices that have outcomes in society, that is, 'to participate in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social order' (Bernstein, 2000, p. xxi).

The primary science project: An example

By way of background, some years ago, Beryl (first author) co-taught with a middle primary teacher who facilitated a multiliteracies project that adopted the transformative orientation espoused by the New London Group (1996; see also Willis, 2009). This orientation: [i] foregrounded inquiry in the children's life worlds, [ii] provided overt instruction that named and theorised content and extended these into new knowledges, [iii] integrated critical framing at every stage, and [iv] culminated in the application of content for real audiences. Specific details of the project were published as Exley and Luke (2009) and Ridgewell and Exley (2010). The classroom teacher, Mrs Sarah Bellum (pseudonym), negotiated with the children (aged seven to 10 years) and an inquiry was set in motion: 'Micro-organisms: Good or Bad?'. In addition to critically framed cycles of situated practice and overt instruction devoted to science knowledge (good and bad micro-organisms and the impact of human intervention) and multimedia (use of the digital microscope, and the Kahootz 3.0 animation software), Mrs Bellum provided the children with access to an Education Queensland approved online blog site for students. The blog site allowed the children to pose questions, document findings and continue real-time conversations in the virtual space. In addition, a situated role play drama introduced a moral dilemma for the children. The children learnt that science knowledge could be used for 'good' or 'evil'. Through the drama, they met one 'do-good' and one 'evil' scientist. The children then had to work in groups to produce a persuasive text to advocate which of the two scientists could have access to the science knowledge accumulated by the class. These persuasive texts were shown to the extended school community and a vote was held to determine which scientist would receive or be denied access to the repository of knowledge.

Throughout the 11-week inquiry, the children, two ‘scientists’ in role, a visiting industry-based scientist, a parent with an interest in ICTs and a preservice teacher produced 49 x A4 pages of transcript through 237 online posts (Ridgewell & Exley, 2010). The findings of this study were that this online space contributed to the experiences of scientific inquiry, supported the diverse needs of children in different ways, and provided an authentic audience for the children’s advocacy work (Ridgewell & Exley, 2010). In sum, this project provided evidence of how multiliteracies pedagogies contributed to all three of Bernstein’s (2000) pedagogic rights – the right of individual enhancement, the right of social inclusion, and the right of political participation – in positively productive ways.

Social media in the early years: Our current project

Our current research project is taking place in classrooms from Prep to Year 3. Beryl and Linda come to this new project as university-based research collaborators with Margaret as one of the classroom teachers. We were all keen to explore the potential of a more user-friendly, multimodal social media platform appropriate for children in the early years of schooling. After consultation with teacher colleagues and the school’s Curriculum Leader of Digital Learning, we decided to use a social media App called ‘Seesaw’ (see <http://web.seesaw.me/>). Another teacher who was involved in the project had used it previously and we all were excited to learn more about its capabilities. Seesaw is an icon driven digital portfolio and social media platform. Blog posts and learning artefacts can be in written, spoken, imaged, videoed and/or emoji form. Parents can be signed into the account by a teacher and blog posts and learning artefacts can be either ‘private’ (between the child, parent and teacher), or ‘public’ (between all registered account holders, including the whole class and the whole parent group). All incoming media needs to be approved by the teacher before being released to the designated audience. Whilst this approval process creates an extra step for the teacher, the children’s independence with archiving their own learning artefacts and blog posts actually saves the teacher considerable time when compared with the manual process of preparing children’s learning artefacts in a Microsoft Office folder and emailing the attachment to parents. Another feature of this platform is that it ‘pings’ to the parent’s phone when learning artefacts and blog posts are provided by their child, or shared with the whole class. Parents are also free to return communication to the repository, which, when approved by the teacher, can be shared with their child or the whole class. Doing so enables

discussions about school learning to be continued in the home and discussions from the home flow back into the classroom with ease and in a timely manner.

The early years English project: An example from Year 2

In one of the research classes, the children from Year 2 worked through a 5 week English curriculum and Media unit. The children explored the PEEL paragraph model in a range of sample persuasive texts. In brief, the PEEL paragraph model incorporates:

- Point of view
- Elaborate
- Evidence
- Link back to your point.

Attention was also given to high and low modality words and persuasive words that express probability and obligation. Through a gradual release of responsibility model, the children watched a modelled writing lesson, and then co-constructed a persuasive text with the teacher on the importance of children playing with Lego. The children were asked to take a position on a matter related to owning or playing with a toy and write a PEEL paragraph persuasive text to convince a reader/viewer to adopt a particular point of view. For example, one child advocated that it is really fun to play with toy guinea pigs.

In terms of the media design, the children worked through the same gradual release of responsibility model to learn about the effect of font size, colour, pictures, music, voices and animations for increasing the persuasiveness of their PEEL paragraphs. Then the children used an App called ‘Shadow Puppet’ (see <http://get-puppet.co/>) to transform their written PEEL paragraphs into a multimodal text. Shadow Puppet is an icon driven application for making short voice narrated videos using screen grabs, text overlay, screen drawings, camera roll, photo streams and/or music with transitions and/or auto image citations. Children can listen to their works-in-progress, and if dissatisfied, re-record their voice narration. This part of the process ensures that work submitted to the teacher meets the satisfaction of the child.

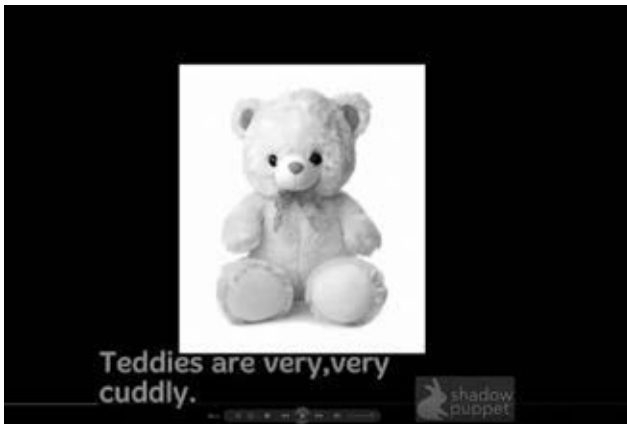
As a case in point, one child, Kaley (pseudonym), advocated that every child must have teddies. Slides 1–5 show screen grabs of Kaley’s 51-second voice narrated persuasive text. Evident within her text is her commitment to a decisive position (shown in Slide 1), use of high modality (e.g., ‘must’ in Slide 1 and ‘definitely’ in Slide 5), and a logical connective (e.g., ‘because’ in Slide 3), a comment from an authoritative source (e.g., ‘shopkeepers’ in Slide 4), and the use of impersonal voice and restatement of



Slide 1: Every child must have teddies.



Slide 4: Shop keepers say it is essential that every child must have some teddies to cuddle with at night time.



Slide 2: Teddies are very, very cuddly.



Slide 5: That is why every child definitely has to have some teddies to cuddle at night time.



Slide 3: They are very cuddly because they have fur on them. That makes them extremely cuddly.

the thesis namely, 'That is why every child definitely has to have some teddies to cuddle at night time' (e.g., Slide 5). Attention was paid to the emotional effect of astute picture choices. Kaley sourced images that demonstrated her argument that teddies are very, very cuddly. Sides 3 and 4 showcase images of children delighting in teddy cuddles. Kaley added visual embellishments to each slide (e.g., a sparkling

wand feature) and read with fluency and expression to emphasise particular points. For example, in Slide 1 she emphasised 'must' and in Slide 3 she emphasised 'extremely'.

In summary, this unit of work contributed to all three of Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic rights in similarly productive ways as discussed earlier in the middle primary science project. Kaley was able to use the affordances of digital media and social media to take a position on a topic that mattered to her. In turn, the possibility for Kaley's parents to respond to the activity immediately through the affordance of the Seesaw app provided an avenue to further her access to pedagogic rights. For example, when Kaley posted her slideshow her mother responded first, with a love heart icon, and second, with the words, 'I want a cuddly teddy!!!!'. Kaley's mother's simple act of responding positively in real time acknowledged and reinforced Kaley's pedagogic rights to develop and learn, to be included, and to participate effectively in the social and civic world.

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