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Redefining Reading Teaching, Learning and Assessment

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Historically, literacy has been a key site of debate, which has led to a variety of approaches to the teaching of reading in primary classrooms and intervention contexts. This is evidenced by a considerable body of literature that focuses on reading as a cognitive process and the growing body of literature that constructs reading primarily as a social practice. The intention of this paper is to provide an analysis of these two positions and to consider the implications for teaching, learning, and assessment of reading. What has become evident in recent literature is the important role that context plays in defining reading performance and reader identity. Context is constituted both by material and social practices, rather than being viewed as a fixed container of activity. Using Lave and Wenger's (1991, p. 179) and Wenger's (1998) notions of community of practice, this paper offers some possible ways forward to reconsider the teaching, learning and assessment of reading.

Introduction

In recent months, I have been engaged in coming to terms with what my understandings of the teaching, learning and assessment of reading entails. Whilst I have participated in conference activities and readings of the literature, I have pondered upon these elements and noted that there appears to be two positions of significance being presented. One posits that reading is a cognitive, individualistic activity whilst the other signifies reading to be a socio-cultural manifestation. I deliberated over whether these are distinctly different ideologies, or whether they are, in fact, just different ends of a continuum. Within this paper, I examine these theoretical stances in order to gain some clarification about how each viewpoint shapes what counts as reading, and associated teaching, learning and assessment practices.

It is clear from the literature that the process of becoming a reader is difficult to explain in any singularly, simple form. The literature on reading and its development reveals that a number of perspectives prevail: Bottom Up (Jones, 1996; Roger, 1995; Sloan & Whitehead, 1986); Top Down (Brown & Mathie, 1990; Cambourne, 1984, 1992; Goodman, 1970), Interactive (Rumelhart, 1994), Social Constructivist (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1962, 1981), Critical (Delpit, 1992; Lankshear, 1994), Socio-cultural (Barratt-Pugh, 2000; Comber & Cormack, 1997). Furthermore, the literature illustrates that historically these theoretical stances have fuelled debate as to the 'best' way to approach the teaching, learning and assessment of reading (Chall, 1967; Deegan, 1995; Shanahan, 2003; Stanovich, 1990; Taylor, 1998). As old debates continue, new understandings

emerge and new debates arise.

At first glance, each of these theoretical positions appears to be significantly different from each other. Upon closer analysis though, it became evident to me that most are focused on the enhancement of particular aspects of students' cognitive understandings and capabilities in regard to reading. Conversely, socio-cultural perceptions of literacy signify reading to be a social practice that is shaped by historical, political, and cultural contexts and purposes (Barratt-Pugh, 2000; Comber & Cormack, 1997). The focus here is not on the individual per se but on the individual participating in reading within a number of communities of practice, each shaped by its own set of values, beliefs and practices about what constitutes reading. Likewise, critical literacy proponents acknowledge reading to be a construct of historical and political dimensions of society which influence what and how readers perform (Delpit, 1992; Lankshear, 1994).

Meanwhile, the educator in the field is left to puzzle over what is or isn't the best way to approach the teaching, learning and assessment of reading. I wonder how they make sense of these ongoing debates as well as what is relevant within the old and new ways of viewing reading. Moreover, I reflect on how teacher values, beliefs and understandings influence the teaching, learning and assessment of reading.

According to Shavelson and Stern (1981), teacher beliefs inform and shape what counts as the characteristics of competency and how and what should be taught. In addition, Shavelson and Stern (1981) proposed that it is teachers' cognitive processes and understandings and the relationship between such cognitive constructs that informs their actions and decision making. This view indicates to me that cognitive formations of beliefs and understandings about reading underpin educator's decisions in regard to what constitutes the competencies of a 'good' reader, and thus what is to be taught, learned, and assessed.

In contrast, Gee (1992, p. 141) postulates that a lot of "what we think of as 'mental' is, in fact, social". We are socialised into ways of thinking, believing, and acting that are reflective of the dominant discourse that shapes our community, power relationships and identity (Gee, 1992). Furthermore, the tools (including the language, texts, and assessment tools) that we utilise are constructs formulated by and for cultural and social purposes. This notion indicates to me that teacher beliefs and decision-making processes should not be viewed in terms of cognitive formations, but rather as practices gained through participation in specific discourses. Furthermore, I discern that teachers can be identified to be learning to be particular kinds of teachers and think about reading in particular ways. Thus, rather than continue to think of reading as a cognitive, individualistic activity, I perceive that we are challenged to view reading as a socio-cultural practice that is shaped by the social and cultural discourses within communities. This signifies that what is valued in regard to reading competency in each community can differ due to a number of social and cultural factors.

Within this paper, I propose to further analyse the cognitive and social ideological positions about reading and to consider the implications to the teaching, learning, and assessment of reading. In particular, I aim to explore the important role that context plays in defining reading performance and reader identity. In this instance, context will be viewed as being constituted both by material and social practices within a community

of practice, rather than being viewed as a fixed container of activity. Using Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) notions of community of practice, I perceive this paper offers some possible ways forward to reconsider the teaching, learning and assessment of reading.

Communities of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 95) identify learning to be a social process involving "participation as a way of learning" within a community. Participation entitles the learner to membership within the particular community of practice. As the learner participates in the community, s/he develops understandings about particular activities and how they are valued and utilised by members of that particular community of practice. Accordingly, an activity may be understood, valued and utilised in different ways in different communities.

In considering reading practices through this lens, I perceive that reading may be identified as a social practice that may be valued and enacted differently within each community. While participating in reading activities in a particular community, learners will become cognisant of what reading entails including what counts as 'good' reading behaviours and how to employ such behaviours. Concurrently, learners will begin to develop membership status and a sense of their reader identity within that particular community of practice.

Wenger (1998) maintains that all communities of practice can be defined by the notions of practice and identity. Practice involves interrelationships between the elements of meaning, community, learning, boundary, and locality. As participants engage in the community practice, they gain meaning of the experience as part of their everyday life in that community. Meaning involves a dynamic negotiation process that evolves from "mutual engagement of participants" (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). Through this negotiation process, a sense of community coherence is attained. At the same time as the nature of community practices is shaped by these negotiations, shared learning histories are developed. "Such histories create discontinuities between those who have been participating and those who have not" (Wenger, 1998, p. 103). In this sense, a boundary is created between the community of practice and the rest of the world. Nevertheless, Wenger (1998, p. 103) maintains that "at the same time as boundaries form, communities of practice develop ways of maintaining connections with the rest of the world". A community of practice thus can be described as a localised "place of negotiation, learning, meaning, and identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 133).

In developing a meaningful identity within a community of practice, the elements of identity in practice, participation and non-participation, modes of belonging, and identification and negotiability interact. Wenger (1998, p. 145) maintains that "the concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual". An individual's identity is constructed during meaning negotiations within a community of practice that s/he participates in. Moreover, membership and the accepted ways of operating in that community are defined. Meanwhile, what the community of practice accentuates as important behaviours and thoughts shapes the individual as a participant and member, and thus her/his identity (Wenger, 1998). Identity is also shaped by both

participation and non-participation. According to Wenger (1998, p. 164), "we not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in". This is not to say that full participation is a constant requirement, but rather to acknowledge that members may have times when they are fully participating, participating on the periphery, or not participating. The varying levels of participation have valid roles to play in determining an individual's identity and membership status. Moreover, participation levels contribute to an individual's sense of belonging to a community of practice. Belonging however also requires the individual to conform or, as Wenger (1998, p. 179) defines it, "align" her/his actions and energies towards the demands of the community and other institutions. In addition, the individual imagines how s/he would like to change their image, sense of self, and their place within the community or world. Through listening, speaking, observing and processes of negotiation, the individual may come to see themselves, or how they would like to be, located within others' behaviours and stories. Furthermore, the individual's sense of belonging may be enhanced when during negotiation situations, their ideas are approved of and accepted by others. Nevertheless, the level of participation and energy that an individual invests in a community of practice influences their identification including their sense of connection, affinity and allegiance with other community members.

Since the length limits on this paper restrict a comprehensive coverage of this topic, I have made a deliberate choice to select samples from the cognitive and social approaches to reading from either end of the continuum. In addition, I will use the components of Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice as a heuristic framework to explore the selected approaches to reading in order to gain insights into the manner in which the teaching, learning and assessment of reading are employed in communities of practice developed in accordance with the particular theoretical stance. Moreover, because I will be utilising Lave and Wenger's (1991) notions of communities of practice as an overlaying element of my analysis, I acknowledge that the analysis is informed by the understanding that each community of practice may be defined in differential ways.

Reading as a cognitive process

Several theoretical viewpoints appear to portray reading to be a cognitive process. As I read through the literature and listened in conference sessions, I became more cognisant of the discourse of cognitive reading approaches. Terms such as processing, knowledge, understanding, control, assimilation, schema, metacognition, automaticity, recall; retrieval, and self-regulation prevailed. In addition, I observed that reading was defined as involving the individual in constructing and managing his/her 'in the head' processes and skills (Gough, 1970; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Winser, 1988). Comber and Cormack (1997, p. 22) also perceived that, within this reading approach, the individual is considered to be "doing brain work, solving the literacy puzzle". In considering reading to be a cognitive skill, I recognised the development of the individual's 'in the head' processes and skills to be crucial to effective reading performance and comprehension. Furthermore, I perceived that no matter where the student was located, he/she would be expected to be able to draw upon these cognitive capabilities to read. The success or failure

in reading then initially seemed to be situated within the individual.

The following analysis will examine one cognitive focused reading approach to ascertain how it informs what counts as reading practice and identity. Moreover, the influence upon the teaching, learning and assessment of reading will be explored through Wenger's (1998) framework of practice and identity.

Bottom up theories of reading

Bottom Up theories define reading as a serial-ordered process proceeding from letters to sounds, to words, to meaning (Gough, 1970; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 1994). Gough's (1970) information processing model of reading begins with visual input of print which is "sequentially transformed from low-level sensory information into ever higher-level encodings" (Rumelhart, 1994, p. 806). LaBerge and Samuels (1974) model, however, outlined the three memory systems (visual, phonological and semantic) that information passes through to process print. While there are some differences between the LaBerge-Samuels model and the Gough model, both are bottom up theories of reading.

Utilising Wenger's (1998) framework for analysis of this theoretical stance, I am aware that as students participate in a classroom community, developed according to 'bottom up' perspectives, they gain an understanding that reading as a practice in that community consists of learning particular knowledges. This theoretical approach defines reading development as beginning with attention to print features of texts, and accordingly initial instruction will engage students in learning letters and incorporating them into words, and words into sentences (Jones, 1996; Roger, 1995; Sloan & Whitehead, 1986). Furthermore, teaching and learning of letter, word, and sentence knowledges will require remembering and recalling these understandings from cognitive structures when required (Zakaluk, 1996). 'Good' readers will develop a keen "sensitivity to letter-sound associations and automatic recognition of words" (Jones, 1996, p. 9) which they use to decode text quickly, effectively and with minimal attention, only subsequently attending to comprehension (Samuels, 1994). Since reading is conceptualised to involve word recognition, texts will have controlled vocabulary. The ability to read such texts fluently and comprehend them will be correlated to children's ability to access letter and word knowledge readily (Samuels, 1994). Through the processes of participation and negotiation, students will come to understand that what constitutes 'good' reading is the capacity for knowing letters and words in a manner that allows quick accession of these knowledges whenever required. Shared understandings of what is valued in regard to reading practices within the classroom community, as well as community coherence, will be gained through negotiations between the teacher, students, and teaching-learning activities involving the use of letter-sound activities, word activities, texts with controlled vocabulary.

Contrary to cognitive views that reading can be achieved within any community of practice once a student has gained control of these required knowledges, I perceive that this reading practice can develop into a localised, bounded entity that has meaning only to the students within that particular community of practice. Connections to the rest of the world appear to me to be problematic, as it would require all communities of practice to be shaped by the same theoretical beliefs, values and practices. Information about

what counts, as valued classroom reading behaviours, would need to be disseminated to family members in order to enable them to align with the school reading. Furthermore, belonging in the classroom community of practice would require individual students to align their beliefs, actions and energies towards accepting the valued behaviours and understandings (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, I perceive that teaching and learning activities will enable students to become aware that the manner in which they can use the valued behaviours and knowledges position them accordingly as participants and members within the classroom. Resistance or rejection would place individuals as members on the margin or periphery of the community of practice. Concurrently, because this theoretical position values the quick accession of letter and word knowledges from the reader's cognitive structures (memory), classrooms employing this approach, will use assessment practices that attend to measuring each student's capabilities in recalling letter and word knowledges. Readers who are not able to access letters and words automatically will be deemed either to not know particular letters and words, or to be unable to access this knowledge effectively when required. I perceive that these assessment practices will further accentuate what is valued and position each student accordingly to their capacities to demonstrate the competencies valued in that particular community of practice. As well, assessment results differentiate who is competent and who is in need of intervention, either within or out of the classroom, to enhance their capabilities in learning and accessing letter and word knowledges.

Reading as a social process

In considering reading to be a social process, I became aware that authors refer to and analyse the historical, political, cultural and social aspects that influence the construction of the reader's identity plus his/her potential to participate in reading events within different reading contexts (Barratt-Pugh, 2000; Comber & Cormack, 1997; Luke, 1993). In addition, I found the language used included terms such as literacy events, literacies, appropriate, social situation, culture, and discourse. When viewing reading as social and cultural processes, reading is defined as a situated practice rather than a mental capacity that can be utilised in any reading situation or context. Moreover, I noted that the values, expectations, and tasks sited within each reading situation influenced and shaped the participation levels and perceived competency levels of the reader.

In the following, I utilise Wenger's (1998) framework to examine the manner in which one approach to reading as a social process ascertains what counts as reading practice and identity construction. In addition, the implications to the teaching, learning and assessment of reading will be explored.

Socio-cultural theories of reading

Barratt-Pugh (2000) and Comber and Cormack (1997) describe a socio-cultural viewpoint of reading as involving an understanding that children gain different understandings about what counts as reading and how it is conducted from their observations of, and participation in, home, community and school reading activities. The manner in which reading is conducted in each context is shaped by a number of factors including cultural and social values, beliefs, and purposes.

Utilising Wenger's (1998) framework for analysis of this theoretical stance, I perceive

the notion of reading to be complex and influenced by factors beyond the individual's control. This approach defines the practice of reading as having been constructed by social, cultural, historical and political influences. In this sense, reading is not a value free practice, but a product of such influences (Luke, 1993). Whilst these influences shape reading as a social and cultural practice, students' understandings, beliefs, and values about reading will be defined in particular ways. Simultaneously, students' identities as readers within a particular community of practice will be constructed. Comber and Cormack (1997) highlight this when they explain that what counts as 'good' reading behaviours is reflective of what is valued within a particular context. People shape reading to suit the purposes and needs of particular audiences, communities and events (Luke, 1993). These events and communities also shape what people read, how they read, and what counts as the characteristics of 'good' reading. Thus reader competence becomes tied to displaying the socially and culturally appropriate behaviours for particular contexts, situations and purposes. In considering this, I recognise that this theoretical approach acknowledges that each community of practice can produce readers who differ from those in other communities of practice. In addition, I perceive the teaching and learning of reading will be informed by the social, cultural, historical and political influences that individual teachers are exposed to and align with. It is feasible to consider that some teachers may be cognisant of these forces and others may not be. Regardless, a teacher's alignment with a particular theoretical approach or mixture of theoretical approaches to reading will shape what is counted as reading within a community of practice. Furthermore, students will be expected to conform to what is valued in reading within that community of practice if they are to achieve success.

The socio-cultural perspective on reading acknowledges that disparities in school and home/community reading practices have the potential to create boundaries and barriers which limit some students' potential to participate effectively in school reading practices. Thomson (2003) and Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland and Reid (2002) utilise case studies to illustrate this point with particular reference to how differences between student's home and school literacy practices limited their potential to gain access to what counts as school success. Conversely, where there were similarities between children's home and school understandings, success within the school context was enhanced. Reading these findings reminded me of students whom I had known who have been identified by school personnel as not performing up to the required standards and of those who seemed to find the transition from home to school a difficult passage. I wonder now if the reasons for these difficulties might have been due to disparities between out of school and school practices. Reflecting on this leaves me with a sense of concern that students are constructing identities of failure in classroom communities of practice and thus operate at marginal or periphery levels of participation because teachers do not understand the significance of viewing their out-of-school knowledges as positive elements which can be brought to serve and be built upon within the school context. For some students, it is conceivable the sense of failure and inability to conform to the demands of the classroom community of practice may lead them to adopt behaviours of resistance and non-participation.

Heath (1991) and Bausch (2003), supporters of a socio-cultural approach to reading,

advocate teachers become more aware of the literacies used in students' communities, and to utilise these understandings to inform their literacy planning. Teachers, who adopt this approach to reading, will also employ teaching-learning methods that acknowledge and utilise the differentiations in students' reading understandings and capabilities as strengths and view these as positive, rather than negative, factors of the diversity within their community of practice. In addition, these teachers will aim to empower students by making them aware of the similarities and differences in the reading practices in the different communities of practice and how they need to adjust their language and behaviours to enable them to perform appropriately when and where required. Through this approach, students will be developing flexible reading behaviours and awareness that as a participant in any community of practice, they need to make choices in regard to what is appropriate for that reading task and purpose. As a result, students will exhibit more competencies in some reading tasks and some situations than in others. These differing levels of competency thus lead to the construction of multiple reading identities. Reading competence is considered to be a demonstration or display of social and cultural practices (Comber & Cormack, 1997). Thus when a student is experiencing difficulty reading a text, the initial investigation would focus on identifying elements of the social and cultural aspects of the reading context and activity that have restricted the reader. Assessment of reading practices therefore will focus on examining multiple dimensions with the reader engaged in reading in different tasks, situations and contexts and observational records being taken at these times. This all signifies to me that assessment of reading will need to be an ongoing process involving the use of a range of assessment tools.

Conclusion

In exploring the cognitive and social notions of reading, I have been confronted with examining my own beliefs and understandings about the teaching, learning and assessment of reading. Initially, like Shavelson and Stern (1981), I thought that my beliefs and understandings (cognitive formations) informed and shaped how I taught and assessed reading. However, during the course of my readings and deliberations on this topic, I became aware that what I thought was a 'mental' capacity has in fact been influenced by a number of social events involving significant people, readings, and professional development activities. This finding correlates with Gee's (1992) views. These social events have enabled me to be challenged and confronted by the disparities between my existing understandings and new ideas. In addition, it has helped me to recognise that the social discourses and tools that I have been immersed in and utilised have shaped me to be a particular kind of teacher. Furthermore, I realise that the kind of teacher that I am now differs from what I was like in the past and what I shall be in the future.

Although this paper and the use of Wenger's (1998) heuristic framework have provided me with insights into how the teaching, learning and assessment of reading is shaped by communities of practice utilising particular theoretical positions on reading, I have discerned that context plays a significant role in the teaching, learning and assessment of reading and the construction of students' identities as readers. In addition,

this analysis has raised many concerns and questions. Unfortunately, it seems to me that the manner in which theoretical approaches to reading inform what counts as reading in communities of practices is complex and highly problematic, and that this fails to provide teachers with an easily accessible understanding of their application and the implications. I also perceive that most theoretical reading approaches would result in reading becoming a practice situated within a community of practice. The potential for reading competencies to transfer from one community of practice to others then appears to me to be reliant upon contexts having similarities, or students knowing how to utilise appropriate reading behaviours for particular tasks, purposes, situations and contexts. I question then whether this leads the discussion back to the notion that cognitive understandings underpin the transfer of reading abilities across communities of practice.

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