Developing cultural literacy and democratic efficacy in Year 9 English: Challenging societal perceptions of middle school curriculum (Summary)

This action research project, *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange*, was undertaken in an independent K–12 co-educational college located in Melbourne’s outer eastern suburbs. In 2010 a survey of the wider college community showed concerns about catering for the individual needs of all students, particularly the middle ability range students.

As an English teacher I knew that the college had excellent learning support and extension programs for students with special educational needs and gifted students; however, the majority of students were in the middle ability range and their academic needs seemed, in comparison, to be overlooked. As a reflective practitioner, and in the context of the college’s philosophy to meet all students’ unique educational needs, I resolved to apply action research methodology (Smith, 2010) to re-thinking Year 9 English curriculum to accommodate, more effectively, the learning needs of the whole spectrum of students. I intended to collaborate with students to determine the direction of their learning and assessment, and to use technology to re-design traditional English text study to create an innovative task to reflect, more effectively, the paradigm of today’s digital world. The aim was to create an activity where students could develop and share their digital literacy skills to enable them to exercise their democratic right to freedom of speech and to engage students in an emotional wellbeing strategy.

In commencing this project, I made a connection between the values identified by the college community and the vision of educational thinker Kurt Hahn, who believed that young people must come into contact with a number of different stimulating activities to draw out their individual interests and talents (Tacy, 2006). I was motivated by McLaughlin’s (2008) recommendation that quality relationships between teachers and students, and students collectively, are intrinsic to promoting wellbeing and resilience in young people. Developing a collaborative community spirit in the classroom requires teachers to embrace student determined interests and initiatives, and to tailor curriculum accordingly (Patton et al., 2000). The English curriculum is an ideal starting point for students to experience participatory, critical and problem-solving democratic engagement. As Print (2007) suggests, students experience citizenship when engaged in competent democratic participation, not textbooks. In a digital landscape young people have the freedom to express themselves (Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2011).
Qualitative data from my Year 9 students showed that given the opportunity to shape English curriculum and to say how they could make a difference in the world, they wanted more creative freedom in their work; freedom from restrictions of set text assessment; more hands-on digital activities; to feel that their work would help them with their careers and lives; and to be allowed to work at their own pace to prevent stress. The humanitarian spirit of student responses, also expressed in text study, confirmed my belief that Year 9 students are high functioning global citizens. I devised a Make a Difference – Digital Exchange task where students had the freedom to choose their own topics and presentation style to promote environmental and social justice. This task replaced the traditional text task and enabled investigation of the efficacy of using YouTube to increase student democratic participation in Year 9 English.

After explaining the project to my students, initial feedback showed some concerns regarding skill capacity and privacy. I acknowledged these concerns and assured them that nothing would be uploaded without their personal permission, and that the project would be a shared journey. I then devised a digital code of conduct that included rules against swearing, putdowns, or revealing personal information (Taranto et al., 2011). To be consistent with their expressed needs emerging from qualitative data, we negotiated a deadline for completion of the project. To aid development of the project I changed the students’ physical learning environment from the institutionalised traditional classroom to the senior school library.

The diverse interests of the students were reflected in their chosen topics, including those such as child labour and sweat shops, pitbull terriers, child soldiers and free range hens. To aid the students in their presentations I introduced the ‘5 Whys’ thinking tool by explaining that ‘5 Whys’ can be asked in relation to anything as a way to move beyond the surface level of understanding. I explained that using ‘5 Whys’ helps people develop their understanding of the root causes that shape social values and patterns of behaviour (Mapwright Pty Ltd, 2008).

Once the students started on their projects some problems arose. It became necessary to create a teacherinthesky YouTube channel to enable me to manage the media; the school policy concerning access to YouTube at school meant students could not upload their own videos at school, so I did it for them; some parents did not permit their children to have a YouTube account, but did not mind if I managed the content on YouTube; and some students included personal information, so I quickly learned to edit YouTube videos.

Success indicators of the project included positive verbal responses from students once they were aware of the nature of the project; positive engagement in the library; participation in discussions demonstrating capacity to align cultural integrity with social justice; presentations that reflected diverse interests and showed engagement and eagerness in students previously disengaged; increased confidence resulting from the opportunity to channel academic commitment; and eagerness to know results.

This sample presentation was on child labour and sweatshops. The student explained that, ‘When we go shopping we only care about finding bargains and looking good. We don’t even think about who made all this stuff. It’s like we don’t care, when actually we do’.

‘5 Whys’
When I am buying clothes the first tag I look at is the price tag.
Why?
Because we have lots of bills to pay, we can’t spend all our money on clothes.
Why?
Because our lives are expensive.
Why?
Because we have a lot of luxuries like technology and holidays.
Why?
Because Australia is a lucky country.
Why?
Because we have never had war or famine here.

This strand prompted students to think about the historical and political context of third world countries.
The future direction is for the YouTube channel teacherinthesky to gain more followers and to inspire others to create their own. The hope is that this work will help all students to find a vital place in mainstream education. The project has potential to support young people in showing their work and voicing their opinions to challenge the status quo. Make a Difference intends to harness the energy of this digital information age and to provide an opportunity for students to ‘Think and act both locally and globally’ (Townsend, 2007, p. 951).

References


