

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

School type : Co-educational K-12

Location : Outer metropolitan

Size : 750-1000 students

ABSTRACT

This action research project challenged the status quo of democratic participation and shared the notion that Year 9 students are high functioning global citizens with important messages of humanitarian value to share within their own communities and the world. The project challenged societal perceptions of middle school curriculum by using a digital landscape to showcase students' ability to grapple with complex issues, and present sophisticated points of view to a potentially infinite audience. The Year 9 English curriculum was used as a means to investigate how critical literacy and democratic efficacy can be developed in Year 9 students. The intention was to use the literacy skills of traditional English text study to create an innovative task that more effectively reflected the paradigm of today's digital world, and to create an activity where students could develop and share their digital literacy skills within a co-authored online community. Qualitative data was obtained from my own classroom observations and students' personal reflections about school and learning. In collaboration with my students, we used their subjective data to develop the *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange* project that involved students in creating media in response to an issue about which they felt strongly. I created a YouTube channel entitled teacherinthesky and made a Make a Difference playlist for the student work to be shared publicly. This report highlights the improved student attitudes, engagement, academic benefits and enhancement of personal wellbeing associated with embedding youth fringe culture within mainstream curriculum.

School Context

Located in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs, the school is an independent K-12 co-educational college. In 2010, the wider college community participated in a survey to determine the focus of strategic planning for the college. Two emerging issues revolved around the values, expectations and desires of the college community. The first issue raised concerns about catering for the individual needs of all students, particularly the middle ability range students; the second highlighted a desire to improve the academic rigour of the education provided at the college, where the diverse range of academic ability and learning needs within the student body reflects an open entry policy.

The college adheres to the educational ideas underpinning the Round Square international network of schools and supports the concept of meeting all students' unique educational needs. Kurt Hahn, on whose educational thoughts Round

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

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Square is based, believed that every person has a *grande passion*, which is often unrealised throughout schooling and life. He believed that young people must come into contact with a number of different stimulating activities, fostered by supportive adults, which are not additional to an already exhausting program of lessons. Rather they must form a vital part of the day's work to allow young people to revel in the experience, and to draw out their individual interests and talents (Tacy, 2006).

My Role

The qualitative data emerging from the wider college community resonated with me. In my role 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 to be overlooked in comparison with the aforementioned students' needs. As a reflective practitioner I resolved to address these concerns by applying 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. My vision was to provide an intellectual challenge to prepare students for the academic rigor of future years of study, and, perhaps more importantly, to prepare students for life. I hoped to elicit emotional engagement to help build students' sense of self, emotional intelligence and social connectedness. The intention was to build confidence and optimism in young people.

I made a connection between the values identified by the college community, the vision of Kurt Hahn and the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. The latter describes the hallmarks of effective schooling as allowing 'every young Australian a real chance of becoming a successful learner, a confident and creative individual and an active and informed citizen' (MCEETYA, 2008, p.19). I believe supporting all students to discover and cultivate their '*grande passion*' is possible within core curriculum. By undertaking a study with my Year 9 English class, students' personal responses to themes and ideas explored in texts could be used to promote critical literacy and democratic participation.

Action Research Aims and Long-Term Goals

My aim was to re-design approaches to curriculum by collaborating with students and allowing them to determine the direction of their learning and assessment. I wanted to demonstrate the capacity of student work to enhance individual wellbeing and to influence positively broader social values. This initiative would move rhetoric to action by including Year 9 students in purposeful spheres of democratic influence, through curriculum (Harris, 2005).

My long term goal was to shift societal perceptions of the function of middle school curriculum to create an environment where students are genuinely able to be 'leaders of today not just tomorrow' (Walsh & Black, 2009, p. 7). My intention was to promote the philosophy that young people can positively influence values, priorities and activity within the world in which they live through exercising their democratic right to freedom of speech and expression.

A Reflective Practitioner's Professional Concern

I believe our modern communication methods allow for greater personalisation and deeper engagement with the world than ever before. This notion re-frames our perception of the elements required to build socio-emotional interconnectedness, collective efficacy and resilience in young people. Today young Australians have access to a wealth of texts and exposure to countless viewpoints. In a digital landscape all voices and opinions can be heard and valued; it is a landscape wherein young people have the freedom to express themselves (Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2011). As a reflective practitioner, I feel optimistic about the long-term ramifications of the egalitarian nature of young people's dynamic participation in digital landscapes. Students have an opportunity to develop a strong sense of identity and belonging, and to demonstrate emotional connections to ideas and people. This agency can inspire ongoing collective and individual contribution to society

(Lewis & Tierney, 2011).

A motivation for this project is McLaughlin's (2008) recommendation that quality relationships between teachers and students, and students collectively, are intrinsic aspects of 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). Whilst students learn effectively through informal influences including role modelling, the media and their family, the English curriculum, wherein activities can take a political, community or civics focus, and may include digital media, newspapers, fundraising activities, activist committees, public speaking and performing arts events, is an ideal starting point for students to experience participatory, critical and problem-solving democratic engagement. Further, Print (2007) suggests that students experience citizenship when they engage in competent democratic participation, not from textbooks. Although relinquishing my carefully planned lessons felt somewhat challenging, I also felt excited about embarking on a new professional journey.

Topsy-Turvy Decision-Making: Collaborating with Students to Determine Curriculum

I started the project by asking my Year 9 students to write a personal reflection exploring how they would like to shape English curriculum. The emerging qualitative data demonstrated that, collectively, they wanted: more creative freedom with their work; freedom from restrictions of set text-derived assessment; more hands-on digital activities; to feel that their work will help them with their careers and lives; and to be allowed to work at their own pace to prevent stress. I also asked students to hypothesise about how they would *make a difference* in the world if they had a magic wand and could make anything happen. Responses identifying social and environmental justice and wellbeing themes overwhelmed me. Educationalist, Paulo Freire, believed that 'History is never predetermined for there always exists the possibility of people acting collectively to change the world' (McInerney, 2006, p.9). The humanitarian spirit of student responses confirmed my belief that Year 9 students are high functioning global citizens. This collective compassion was leverage for students to demonstrate democratic efficacy.

In Year 9 English at the college students study John Boyne's *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* (2006), an emotionally confronting fiction about the Holocaust. Assessment includes a creative task that has traditionally been a written or an oral presentation. After considering the student reflections I was determined to honour their identified needs and to re-invent this task. I wanted to create a pathway for students to use their learning to engage in authentic social participation. I was inspired by the complex emotional responses *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* evoked in students, in particular their empathic questioning of humanity and history, for example, 'Did the German people really just let this happen?' I identified that through asking big questions the students were engaging in critical literacy (Gilbert, 2010). From observing these responses to the novel, in combination with the spirit of their reflections, I felt compelled to support students in engaging in constructive and empowering activity in response to learning about the bleak history of the Holocaust. In a society where conflict and extremism is prevalent, I wanted students to understand that they have the power to shape history positively through their own actions (Schen & Gilmore, 2009). Motivation and optimism are powerful tools in response to an arguably increasing passive, fear-driven society. 'Empathy is an antidote' (Goleman, 2004, p. 90) in a complex world.

This humanitarian focus in the students and in Boyne's novel prompted me to delve deeper into understanding how I could use my students' awareness of social injustice as leverage for them to develop the confidence to tackle today's global issues, and to believe their actions will have a positive systemic effect (Seider, 2009). I devised a *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange* task where students had the freedom to choose their own topic and presentation style. I intended to use this task to investigate the efficacy of using YouTube as a strategy for students to increase their democratic participation as part of Year 9 English.

In developing *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange* six of the general capabilities outlined in the Australian Curriculum: literacy, information and communication technology competence, critical and creative thinking, personal and social competence, ethical behaviour, and intercultural understanding (ACARA, 2010) were interwoven into my Year 9 English course to promote wellbeing through increasing students' sense of self and social connectedness. Fielding (2001) recommends that we should re-focus and work with the essential ingredients of human participation. Young people need opportunities for creative involvement in activities that are demanding of self and provide opportunities to grow. Rich experience early in life can help instil an individual sense of freedom and value, essential ingredients in developing lifelong altruistic principles. It was exciting for me to extrapolate this utopian ambition from the Australian Curriculum's *general capabilities*. Indeed, Year 9 is a very special social and academic developmental time. Young people need to experience a climate where they are encouraged to envisage themselves being happy individuals and making a difference in the world, in order to believe it is possible during their adult lives.

Make a Difference – Digital Exchange was inspired by Levy's (2009) discussion of the success of the *ruMAD? Inquiry-based framework for Australian schools*. *ruMAD?* is an opportunity for young people to undertake projects they are passionate about in relation to local and global issues. The framework empowers young people to take an active role in shaping the world around them, and in doing so, helps them to develop a deeper understanding of community and society. Issues such as prejudice and poverty can be positively addressed. Students are encouraged to dream and collaborate to devise an activity they believe will make a difference. Positive democratic participation is effective in helping young people feel confident and optimistic about their social capacity (Black, 2008). Creating media to share on YouTube was a tangible and manageable fledgling activity for my students and me, whilst still embracing the spirit of *ruMAD?*.

The *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange* was also inspired by McClanahan's (2010) *First Person Singular* project. This project involved students from a small Yup'ik fishing village in western Alaska sharing with the world their personal experience concerning the impact of global warming on their livelihood through creating an iMovie. I found *First Person Singular Accounts of Climate Change in Alaska* (2009) on YouTube and showed it to my students to launch the *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange*. I explained that 'These Alaskan students had an opportunity to share an important message; you will all have the same opportunity'. The iMovie is narrated in English and then in Yup'ik. I asked my students why the Indigenous language had been included. One student replied, 'So we can understand these people have lived there for thousands of years, long before the English even went to Alaska.' Another student added, 'This language shows the long history of people in the area, and now it is threatened.' These responses reinforced the idea that the students were ready to grapple with complex global issues. At the end of the iMovie the following appears, 'Who should we tell about this? ... Let he who has an ear listen'. I used this as a preamble to introduce *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange*, positioning students to consider what message they would share with the world.

I was explicit in sharing my professional motivation with my students, and explained that I had devised the *Make a Difference – Digital Exchange* in direct response to their reflections about English class. I shared the aforementioned overview of their identified interests and learning needs and continued by explaining that young people play a key role in determining future directions, including the role of technology in our lives, to promote environmental and social justice. I explained that by trusting the leaders of the future now, we will build confidence and vision collectively for the benefit of humanity and the earth, and that The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), advises that young people must have opportunities to express views freely; they must have the opportunity to participate in freedom of expression including: writing, art, media and discussion. Young people must have the encouragement to examine ideas and values and form individual beliefs. In response I saw the smile of a usually withdrawn student, and the exclamation of, 'Wicked! I know what I'm doing', from another who was usually disengaged in class. These memories are etched into my mind; they were the signs of success I had hoped for.

I sought students' opinions on the activity, and asked them to consider possible ideas for individual projects. Feedback showed they were worried that they didn't have the skills for making something for YouTube. I explained that this would be a shared journey where we would all help one another to improve our digital literacy. One student did not want to share work on YouTube. This request for privacy was acknowledged and the class was assured that nothing would be uploaded without their personal permission. After this discussion I devised a *digital code of conduct* that included rules against swearing, putdowns, or revealing personal information (Taranto et al., 2011). Two girls asked if they could have the holidays to complete their task because they wanted to create a short film. I agreed, as this was consistent with the expressed needs emerging from qualitative data. I set the deadline until after the holidays for all students.

Using Middle School Curriculum as Leverage for Developing Democratic Efficacy

The middle years provide an opportunity for young people to develop a lifelong value system by learning to understand ethical complexities in society. Adolescence is a time of spiritual and personal development, and a time when young people can synthesise their understanding of the world around them to develop a strong sense of purpose and self-esteem through initiating democratic participation (Fenwick 1977). I hoped *Make a Difference* would increase student motivation, engagement and achievement through allowing students to determine their own approach in response to learning about the universal humanitarian themes associated with the Holocaust. For students to be truly engaged, I felt it was critical for them to connect their *Make a Difference* presentations to their own unique world and values (MCEETYA, 2008).

I hypothesised that patterns of student passivity, disengagement and underachievement could be transformed when students are invited to explore their valuable insights and collectively influence curriculum. Collaboration involves sharing individual strengths and motivation, for the collective good. This could support the development of rich intellectual and social learning activities as a normal part of daily schooling. Indeed, middle school provides fertile ground for establishing democratic agency (Fielding, 2001). To adequately accommodate all learners it was important to focus on building the skills of questioning, risk-taking, assertiveness and creativity, to better prepare young people for the future (Hargreaves et al., 2002). From a systemic perspective, student-driven curriculum is a wonderful opportunity to create real social agency amongst the entire Year 9 cohort. Disengaged students will not have the choice to opt out of valuable civics and political activities because it will not be voluntary; instead it will be woven into their daily school lives. This was a chance to challenge the status quo of democratic participation, by embracing collective efficacy, and moving beyond superficial minimal student representation (Walsh & Black, 2009).

Using a reflective practitioner approach, I aimed to remedy apathy in young people by relinquishing the traditional hierarchal power structure of teacher-led curriculum initiatives. I allowed students greater responsibility in shaping the dynamics of curriculum. In so doing students had the opportunity to exercise democratic agency through creating their own content, in partnership with me. (Walsh & Black, 2009). As a teacher I am an immediate agent of change; I can play a significant role in creating avenues to improve student wellbeing through facilitating opportunities for democratic participation (Ben-Peretz, 1980).

To aid development of the project I changed the students' physical learning environment away from that of the institutionalised traditional classroom, where students are not necessarily involved in open dialogue about their education (Smyth et al., 2003), to the senior school library. Each Friday I participated with the librarian in team teaching. This provided an opportunity for the Year 9 students to see the library as an exciting and valuable learning space. The Year 9 students sought assistance from the librarian and me, and they used the digital and hard copy resources to research their *Make a Difference* projects. A success indicator of this initiative was demonstrated in the students' assiduous and engaged approaches whilst sharing the library with Year 12 students who were studying during their free periods. My fondest memory of our library sessions is when

a Year 9 student paused from iMovie editing and removed head phones to explain the activity to a group of curious Year 12 students. The open plan, collaborative atmosphere of the library contributed to altering student experiences and perceptions of the value of their school work within school and society (Gislason, 2009).

This action research created an opportunity for students to develop their emotional intelligence (EI). Participating in *Make a Difference - Digital Exchange* involved students in taking personal risks and increasing self and community awareness. Goleman (2004) explains that EI is developed through people seeking creative challenges to effect change in themselves and society. Developing EI in students involves teachers in modelling their own EI to promote student learning. This means teachers must also take risks. Focusing on EI could have a reciprocal effect within the college and the wider community. People with the motivation to effect change are optimistic about their capacity to participate in and to shape society. School provides an environment for establishing empathic understanding in young people; this can stimulate increased democratic participation throughout life. In a changing society parents, teachers, and the wider community must work together to embrace innovative resources and community spirit to ensure all students are educated well. *Make a Difference* was created for students to participate in an inclusive and responsive environment. To actively build EI, egalitarian dialogue must be the foundation of all social interaction (Mansouri et al., 2009).

The English Classroom is an Onramp to the Information Superhighway

In a complex and changing world, the function of schooling and the role of teachers are rapidly transforming. This digital age allows for ongoing global participation, access to information exchange and to infinite knowledge sharing (Townsend, 2007). Student voice can be digitalised in countless creative ways for global sharing. Through using YouTube, the learning undertaken by students in developing a substantiated viewpoint, traditionally in the form of an essay, can be transformed. Coursework, which may not be shared beyond the classroom, can, instead, be shared within a digital space for a broad audience. Engaging in digital literacy is a powerful tool in democratic participation (Smythe & Neufeld, 2010).

Once the students started on their projects, their enthusiasm very quickly produced results. Two boys' photo-stories about food and water poverty, which were uploaded to YouTube and sent to me via an email link, caused me to contemplate how I was going to manage this media. I realised that I needed to create a YouTube account and like my students' work. I shared my new *teacherinthesky* YouTube channel with the students to inspire the cohort. When I explained I would like their work to connect all of the clips, one student suggested I create a playlist called *Make a Difference* to make it easy for people to see all the clips in one place. I took this student's wise advice. In seeing these initial photo-stories students described them as *professional*. I asked the class to critically consider the impact of using the words *we* and *you* in media. One student responded that 'It makes it aimed at us personally, we can't ignore it and we feel responsible for wasting water, and not doing more to help save it.' This led to a discussion about water usage at home. There was strong class admiration for those students who had shared their water saving strategies. This discussion was another indicator of success because it normalised the value of water conservation. This dialogue allowed students to align cultural integrity with social justice, through being encouraged to speak up about issues that affect our lives (Young, 2009).

As students completed their projects I became aware of some barriers concerning YouTube in the classroom that necessitated some problem-solving strategies. Firstly, students could not access YouTube at school without breaking the school network policy and using a proxy site to unblock YouTube. This meant they could not upload their own videos at school, so I did it for them. Secondly, some parents did not permit their children to have a YouTube account, but did not mind if I managed the content on YouTube. Finally, some students included personal information about themselves. I quickly taught myself how to edit YouTube videos to remove personal details. This was a very practical benefit of having uploaded the videos myself, and proved to be valuable

learning for me personally in observing how readily young people reveal personal information in a digital landscape. The function of technology is changing, and it is challenging the dynamics of teaching and learning. As I acquired my new editing skills, I felt myself navigating the complexity of online communities through a different lens. I grappled with the juxtaposing notion that there is need for innovation and risk-taking; however, this must be balanced by ethical conduct and care (Taranto et al., 2011).

Responding to Bleak History with Positive Action – Critical literacy Begins with Social Commentary and Becomes Democratic Efficacy

The decisions made about creating YouTube media reflected the diverse interests of the students. The following is an extract of student comments in relation to their chosen topic. Underneath each statement is a thread of ‘5 Whys’ explored by the class. I introduced this 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, and delve deep into the heart of the issue. 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). I demonstrated how ‘5 Whys’ works by posing the first question in response to the first presentation below.

This first 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 second presentation was made in response to the call to ban pitbull terriers recently. The student commented that, ‘The humans who raise the dogs are to blame, not the dogs, all dogs deserve kind owners so they won’t want to attack people’.

‘5 Whys’

People want pitbull terriers banned.

Why?

Because they can attack people, and they killed a child.

Why?

Because some pitbulls are not well trained.

Why?

Because some people shouldn’t be dog owners.

Why?

Because they might be cruel to the dogs, or not train them properly.

Why?

Anyone can buy a dog, it doesn’t mean they are going to be good dog owners.

This thread prompted discussion about educating the community to be responsible pet owners.

This third presentation was on child soldiers. The student explained that, 'We all just play COD (*Call of Duty*) because it's fun and you can meet your friends online, this movie reminds us that there are kids younger than us that are fighting for real'.

'5 Whys'

There are too many child soldiers being forced to fight in poor countries around the world.

Why?

The countries are at war, in lots of places it is civil war.

Why?

Because the people don't get along, they fight over land, and governments are corrupt so they fight the politicians too.

Why?

Because living conditions are not very good and the politicians are greedy.

Why?

Because the government is corrupt and the politicians get away with it.

Why?

Because there is nobody to make sure the politicians do the right thing.

This investigation into child soldiers led to discussion about political systems and democracy.

The work of these three students and their contribution to class discussion are success indicators for the project. These students had a history of disengagement and non-work submission, despite being academically capable in English. Their *Make a Difference* presentations were completed early, and they were eager to share them.

This fourth presentation was on free range hens. The student reflected that, 'When I thought about all the things I could make a YouTube clip about, I decided that what I do in my own backyard could be the most important message of all to share. People can learn that saying "No" to battery hens is easy!'

'5 Whys'

Battery hens are kept in horrible conditions.

Why?

Because it's cheaper to keep them in small cages.

Why?

Farmers don't have to spend much to keep the hens, and people can buy cheap eggs.

Why?

People want money in their pocket.

Why?

Because people need to have savings, people worry that they might run out of money.

Why?

We don't know when we might need money, anything can happen.

This inquiry prompted students to consider why we worry about money, and why we believe saving a few dollars is more important than giving chickens a quality life.

This student was motivated in class and eager to improve skills. The student's decision to promote free range hens as a humanitarian lifestyle choice is a success indicator as the project provided the opportunity to channel academic commitment into an issue about which the student was both passionate and knowledgeable. I observed the student's confidence build after having the opportunity to share expressed concern about battery hens, alongside sharing enthusiasm for keeping free-range hens (Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2011).

From observing the students' work and their responses to each other's work, I understood how the *Make a Difference* project could build social capital. The project required a combination of trust in self and others and a willingness to share and respect personal beliefs (Cahill & Freeman, 2006). I was thoroughly impressed with the breadth of exploration the students undertook. I was astounded by the calibre of persuasive influence student projects may have on a potentially infinite audience.

The final success indicator is embedded in this question from a student who has struggled in English throughout secondary school, and has exhibited severe lack of motivation in class during Year 9, 'When are we getting our *Make a Difference* task grades back?' The student's photo-story about banning steeplechasing included emotionally uplifting music in the conclusion, images of the student's family's horses running free, and the words 'Why not give horses a real life to live?' Every aspect of this task was satisfied in the presentation, and the student knew it. The class responded with an enthusiastic round of applause. The student's question about when the class would receive their grades indicated individual engagement and confidence about English (Lewis & Tierney, 2011).

Future Directions

The future direction for this project is for the YouTube channel *teacherinthesky* to gain more following, and to inspire others to create their own YouTube channel to share unique and interesting media. The hope also is that this work will help fringe youth culture to find a vital place in mainstream education. If something has cultural value for young people, then it is of educational importance (Dreon et al., 2011). The project has potential to support young people in showing their work and voicing their opinions to politicians. Young people making deeply personal statements to politicians on issues and values about which they feel strongly is a powerful way to challenge the status quo of democratic participation. Glazier's (2007) notion of the English classroom promoting activist citizenry through students critically evaluating society and engaging in action in response to identified institutionalised inequity, resonates with me deeply. *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).

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