

Accomplishing new literate practices: Students with disabilities rewrite the story

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This paper relates a teacher's story about a classroom-based research project undertaken with a Year 3 to 7 Special Area Resource class, located in a Mainstream Primary School in the south west of Adelaide. The class consisted of 11 students verified as students with disabilities under the DECS disability criteria. The students' age range (from 8 to 13 years), variations in physical growth and development, different experiences, intellectual abilities and disabilities make co-teaching this group a challenging undertaking. Another difficulty faced involved establishing a sense of cohesion amongst this group who are taxied daily to and from the class from a number of suburbs. Despite these differences, the students shared an interest in popular culture. This opened an opportunity to engage them in the literacy work of the classroom through the use of media along with information and communication technologies (ICTs).

ICT, e-book, students with disability, literacy

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES DEVELOP AN E-BOOK BASED ON A FAMILIAR POPULAR CULTURE TEXT?

Imagine a group of 11 young people between 8 and 13 years of age in a single classroom. Imagine again those 11 young people with a range of disabilities (physical and intellectual) being taxied between home and school daily. Living out of the local area means that these students have little or no opportunity to interact or socialise with each other or with their same-age peers from within the school. Welcome to our Special Area Resource classroom, where group cohesion was minimal. Put plainly, our students simply could not get along – a state of affairs that was directly affecting our ability to teach and their ability to learn.

At the time of this research, our teaching team consisted of two teachers working part-time, with additional support provided by two School Services Officers (SSOs). As a team we took great comfort in being able to share the load, talk through issues and plan together. What had become blindingly evident to us during the first term was the need to try something different. We agreed that there was a need for a structured social skills program and subsequently all attended training and development in the *Stop, Think. Do: Social Skills Program*, during the Term 1 holiday break. We also decided that we needed to motivate the students somehow and agreed that:

- our students appeared to remain on task when accessing the computer; and
- students we had had in previous years had cooperated more when working together, using the computer to achieve a group goal.

We decided to base our Term 2 unit around the concept of 'getting along'. How to do so in a way that would engage our students but not rely on their ability to read and comprehend large amounts of written text was our next question. After much discussion, we decided to:

- use the popular culture movie “SHREK!” (which proved familiar to all the students) as the focal point of the unit;
- adopt a cross-curricular approach; and
- embed a structured social skills program.

Together, my co-teacher and I worked to plan the teaching and learning activities that we believed would best achieve our desired outcomes. What were we aiming for? The main aim of the unit was for our students to understand the term ‘getting along’ and develop behaviours such as managing their impulsivity, listening to others with understanding and empathy, and thinking interdependently. The story of Shrek provided us with an example of how friendships can develop and grow, in addition to what ‘getting along’ looks like, sounds like and feels like, in a format that our students could respond to.

Academically, our unit of work titled “SHREK: Getting Along” was designed with links to the SACSA Framework including Essential Learnings, Key Competencies, Habits of the Mind as well as subject area specific learning outcomes for English, The Arts, Technology, Studies of Society and the Environment, and Health and Physical Education.

BEGINNING THE UNIT

We read and compared the original text by William Steig (1990) and the modern version (based on the movie) by Weiss (2001), discussing similarities and differences in the characters, the story and the outcomes.

Concurrently, we viewed the movie “SHREK!” which involved repeated and interrupted viewings of particular sections (scenes) of the video with specific learning outcomes in the area of English attached to each scene viewed. Literacy tasks included: character profiles; words; definitions and pictures matching; identifying and matching words and actions; verbs (past tense to present or future); reading and understanding signs; sentence structure; and reading comprehension. Our students participated willingly and enthusiastically in these tasks, experiencing a high degree of success in the grammar-based tasks – an area in which they had generally struggled.

As a group, we re-wrote an alternative ending, which was a task much easier designed than done with this group of students. By their very nature, these students are comfortable with certainty, familiarity and repetition; typically they dislike and resist change. They can be literal rather than imaginative and find writing stories of any kind just too difficult. However, with persistence and lots of encouragement, we wrote an alternative ending (with a twist) to this story that they all knew so well.

HOW DID THIS BECOME AN ICT TASK?

My co-teacher and I had created e-Books with previous students (for example, *The Solar System*, *Australian Animals*, *Hickory Dickory Dock*) and agreed that this was a way of motivating our students to engage in literacy and ICTs simultaneously. Hence, we decided to create a class e-Book to share our alternative ending for SHREK with a wider audience that could include other classes at school, students’ families and friends.

Each student created a page of our alternative ending using Microsoft PowerPoint. Having written our alternative ending in a linear fashion and as a group, no specific individual had ownership of any one particular sentence or idea. Therefore, we needed an equitable way of ensuring that all 11 students had a page of our ending to illustrate and type. Why? Basically we were trying to strengthen group cohesion. Put simply, after I had divided our new ending into 11 logical sections, we had a structured but random draw, to establish who would illustrate and type the text for each page of our new story.

Probably, the most beneficial aspect of this whole process was how easily and happily the students accepted what part of the story they would illustrate and type. Students accepted this process as being equitable, with no individual feeling that any other had received extra favour or that any other would receive more kudos, which was a wonderful achievement and a positive move along the continuum of 'getting along'.

PRODUCTION BEGINS

Initially, the students illustrated their individual pages on paper. Once completed, students were assisted to scan their illustrations and save them into their personal folders on the school network.

The next step involved the students inserting their personal illustrations as the backgrounds for their pages (that is, slides). They then created text boxes and entered their text on their pages. We had established a list of assessment criteria whilst planning the unit of work and our students were informed of these before beginning any work on their own pages. Specifically, students were informed that each individual page would be assessed by a teacher and also by a small group of their peers who would both be assessing a number of the components of each page (for example, font size, type, colour, location; appropriateness of background pictures). The students made their own decisions about these aspects of their pages. They were also responsible for editing what they typed, checking that they had copied the text correctly. Editing is a task these students find most difficult on paper ... and equally so on the computer.

SUPPORTING THE STUDENTS WITH ICT

For a number of the group, this had not been their first encounter with either the hardware or the software. However, their difficulty in retrieving skills and prior achievement from long-term memory dictated a need for me to revisit the basics required. I used a range of strategies, depending on each particular student's needs to ensure that what was required was understood. Some students were very capable at following step-by-step verbal instructions to achieve a task (for example, locating a file or folder on the network, inserting an illustration as background). Others found verbal instructions difficult or confusing, requiring me to model how to do a specific step for them followed by talking them through tasks.

While the students were creating their individual pages, my task was to create the summary pages for the story up to the point at which our alternative ending began. As each student indicated satisfaction with his or her page, assistance was provided via oral prompts to enable each student to import his or her page into the main PowerPoint file at the appropriate point. Initially, I provided the oral prompts. However, as the more capable students became more confident, they became the peer tutors who provided suitable oral prompts. This was most gratifying to observe, and demonstrated how far we had come along the continuum of 'getting along'. It became clear that, as the students achieved success, they were more inclined to want to share their skills, their understandings and their knowledge with their peers, which had the desired result of improving group cohesion. I note though, that it is often disconcerting to hear yourself talking when in fact it is not you, but one of the students instructing another.

We assisted the students to record themselves, reading their own text and to insert this recording into their pages. During this stage of the project, the students were highly critical of themselves, persisting with rehearsing and re-recording their script until totally satisfied with the finished product. Students also volunteered to read and record the text in the summary section of the e-Book. This was a clear demonstration of how they valued their own work and achievements as well as the product as a whole. Further, it required them to be persistent to achieve the desired outcome, which was another benefit of the unit.

During the course of the unit the students accessed a range of resources including web links to sites related to the movie SHREK, sites related to both printed versions of the text and links to a range of SHREK based activities on the web.

We listened to and enjoyed the soundtrack from the movie during the term and two tracks from this source were included in our finished product, at the start and finish of our e-Book. Pages (slides) acknowledging all of these resources were created along with a front cover, last page and table of contents.

CREATING AN INTERACTIVE TEXT

Collectively, students and staff envisioned the finished product as an interactive e-Book with the reader able to enter and exit at his or her chosen point of the text, as might be done with a real book. We wanted our readers to be able to move forwards or backwards a page at a time, or if preferred, to access specific points of the story by selecting from a table of contents. We also wanted our readers to be able to enjoy the web resources and activities that were accessed during the unit. The problem solving of how to achieve these outcomes was my responsibility. However, once a group of buttons was created and tested thoroughly, I worked with each student to assist them to insert the group of buttons into their own pages.

Decisions about the interactive options that were included required our students to think beyond themselves, to consider what others might want to see, to do, and to read. This was possible due to the students personal experiences using ICT for pleasure, with eight of the 11 having regular access to ICTs at home. Each had a view on what was required, based on their own experiences with a favourite software program and my co-teacher and I marvelled at their contrasting views. Considerable discussion and negotiation was required to reach a consensus as to what the majority considered most important inclusions in our interactive text. The following points were agreed upon:

- We did not want our e-Book just to go in one direction.
- Copyright laws dictated that we needed to acknowledge all sources used.
- Our desire to have a finished product that reflected the fun aspects of the unit:
 - Reading the books
 - Viewing the movie
 - Listening to the soundtrack
 - Accessing various web sites
 - Participating in concrete technology activities
 - Creating puppets

Our students created a complete and polished product that had value for them. The added bonus is that it is of value to others as an interactive product that can be used over and over again for pleasure. Their level of success is evident to all who interact with the finished product. More importantly, it is evident to the students themselves, resulting in:

- improved self-esteem;
- greater confidence in their own abilities to read, write and re-write a story that is entertaining for a broad audience;
- increased enthusiasm in their learning; and
- a desire to do it again.

While creating an e-Book did involve paper-based activities including drawing the backgrounds and drafting the alternative ending, it did prove to be far more involved than creating a paper book. It also relied heavily on the availability of resources:

- human (adults to support, prompt, assist, instruct and with necessary expertise with aspects of the technology); and
- technological (computers available and functioning reliably, availability of appropriate software, scanner, Internet access for researching and activities, microphone and CD burning capabilities).

REWRITING THE STORY: WHAT DID THE STUDENTS ACHIEVE USING MEDIA AND ICT?

I was asked by a colleague to consider the aspects of why this unit worked for these students. To summarise the benefits of this task:

- it was visually appealing,
- it had a purpose,
- it was stimulating,
- it was entertaining and fun,
- it provided variety, choice of activities,
- the students could relate to the characters, to the story and to the music,
- it afforded the students an opportunity to observe, verbalise and discuss feelings with their peers in a non-personal way, and
- it enthused them in a way that we had not seen before. They wanted to work on the e-Book and continuously asked to do so.

What, for us, was most rewarding? Hearing our students offering to help each other accomplish components of the project; complimenting each other on their achievements; encouraging each other to persist when things weren't going well; seeing our students working together; seeing the degree of group cohesion increase; and knowing that, for all of us, being together in the classroom could be, and now was, an enjoyable experience where teaching and learning could, and did, occur. In summary, what was most rewarding for us was seeing the students getting along.

Although this project was incredibly time consuming and labour intensive in terms of supporting the students to access the hardware and software effectively, the rewards for all involved made it worthwhile. These students had each contributed to creating something very special, as a group and cohesively. This was a phenomenon we thought impossible at the end of the first term of the school year. Each student was provided a burned copy of our finished product on CDROM so that they could share their achievements with family and friends. The feedback from these sources has been most pleasing. Furthermore, our finished product, "SHREK: An Alternative Ending" is accessible on our school Intranet, along with the unit plan and assessment criteria.

REFERENCES

- Steig, W. (1990). *SHREK!* Harper Collins Production.
- Weiss, E. (2001). *SHREK: The Novel*. Puffin Books Publication.