

## **Drawing on intertextuality in culturally diverse classrooms: Implications for transfer of literacy knowledge**

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*ABSTRACT: This article examines the effects of using intertextual theories to refine writing instruction in culturally diverse contexts, in terms of transfer of learning. Within a wider, two-year intervention study in six schools, four teachers were observed for a term each to describe how intertextual theories resulted in refinements to writing instruction their Year 4-8 classes. These effective teachers of writing redesigned their writing programmes to create intertextual support for their writers. The nature of the changes resulted in writing instruction which allowed for incorporation of students' textual knowledge as well as an explicit focus on future applicability of their learning. The observed teaching practices arguably offered students a greater degree of authority over their situated textual knowledge than might otherwise exist. The results of the study offer possibilities for writing instruction to build students' knowledge through text inquiry as part of writing lessons.*

*KEYWORDS: Writing instruction, transfer of learning, intertextuality, incorporation of resources, instructional design.*

### **DESIGNING EFFECTIVE WRITING INSTRUCTION IN CULTURALLY DIVERSE CONTEXTS**

There is an urgent need to design instruction which meets the needs of learners from minoritised cultural groups (Bishop, O'Sullivan & Berryman, 2010), both internationally and in New Zealand. In writing, this need is especially urgent for two reasons: firstly, there is a perceived weakness in teaching writing generally, indicated by the underachievement of students in writing when compared with their achievement in reading and mathematics (Parr, 2010); secondly there is a weakness in teaching writing to Māori and Pasifika students, indicated by the underachievement of these groups of students compared with other students (Flockton, Crooks, & White, 2006).

Theoretically, instruction designed to meet the needs of learners in culturally diverse classrooms would incorporate the features of culturally responsive teaching, two attributes of which include incorporation of students' resources and making what is implicit or assumed explicit and able to be controlled. Such instruction may require an explicit focus, to value and incorporate the resources that students bring with them as poly-contextual participants in classrooms (Bishop et al., 2010; Lee, 2009). In New Zealand, while there is an acknowledgment of the generalised importance of students' cultural resources (for example, Ministry of Education, 2009), there is less understanding about how these might be incorporated within subject areas or contribute to successful writing instruction. Arguably, current approaches to writing pedagogy may indeed constrain this aim of incorporation.

The additional element, of “unlocking what is unfamiliar”, is the need for explicit instruction in those features of learning that are needed for students to become highly competent. The various studies of Maori and Pasifika students’ voices also consistently identify the need for clarity and guidance around what is required and can be given directly (Amituanai-Toloa, McNaughton, Lai & Airini, 2009; Bishop et al., 2010). Combined, “building on the familiar” and “unlocking the unfamiliar” have been identified as ways of making connections for students across the home and school contexts (McNaughton, 2002).

Underpinning the notion of building on the familiar is an acknowledgment that, when learning, students necessarily draw from their prior knowledge. In their reconceptualisation of transfer as “preparation for future learning”, Bransford and Schwartz (1999) point out that in order for learners to build on their prior knowledge, they need to “know with” their existing knowledge. At issue is transfer of learning. When calling on their prior knowledge, students need to “transfer in”, or call upon previous learning that will facilitate success in the current context (Schwartz & Martin, 2004). Conversely “transfer out” of a learning context is also crucial. This is the situation that makes learning purposeful: when students use current learning to make sense of future learning.

When students write, they draw on skills, strategies, knowledge and experience of previous reading and writing, that is, they transfer in their existing textual knowledge. Across differing conceptions of writing, the place of this knowledge about texts is recognised. In Hayes’ (1996) seminal model of the writing process, knowledge is conceived as existing within long-term memory, upon which the writer calls while composing. In models of writers as designers (Kress & Bezemer, 2009; Myhill, 2009), writers need to build a repertoire of design features or resources. Alternatively, if writers are conceived of as participants in an activity or discourse, then participation in that discourse will be framed by earlier turns (Dyson, 1998, 2009; Hyland, 2002).

Thus, students need to apply their receptive knowledge gleaned when reading texts in the productive context of writing (transfer). It follows that for students to become effective writers, they need extensive and generalisable knowledge of texts including what makes texts effective, in addition to how to go about writing them. Empirical evidence would seem to support such a conclusion. Studies of learners show how prior experience with texts provides the basis for knowledge for writing (for example, Kamberelis & Bovino, 1999) and that discourse knowledge contributes to student achievement in writing (Olinghouse & Graham, 2009).

In classroom settings with students from diverse backgrounds, these questions of transfer require pedagogy that will enable “double” transfer for students. Firstly, pedagogy is required that will enable students to draw on their existing knowledge of texts in the service of their writing. This we consider to be the incorporation of the familiar in terms of textual resources. Secondly, instruction needs to build learners’ textual knowledge in ways that mean that it can be used in future contexts. This second part of the double transfer equation potentially unlocks the unfamiliar for learners.

Transfer theory suggests that in order for students to draw from their prior knowledge (in this case of texts and effective writing) certain conditions must be met. Firstly, students need to have sufficient initial learning experiences to facilitate depth of

knowledge (Brown & Kane, 1988; Brown, Kane, & Long, 1989). Such deep knowledge needs to be grounded in a number of contexts. In particular, Gee's (2001) view of "situated meanings" (p. 243) is helpful for identifying the sorts of knowledge that are useful for future contexts. These, he argues, are mid-level meanings, understandings that have been refined through multiple examples. Such "situated meanings" are neither too general (tied only to understanding at the level of theory) nor too concrete (tied only to a few specific instances). Situated meanings, then, "are both general, and specific, they are generalized across variations and contexts, but they are nonetheless tied to sorts of contexts; thus they are neither totally contextualized nor decontextualized" (p. 245). Crucially, such "useful tools" for learning seem to be produced through gradual refinements of understanding to account for variations in contexts, thus allowing learners to draw more flexibly on prior experiences and associated knowledge (Wagner, 2006). Hence, multiple examples allow a learner to perceive the applicability of knowledge across contexts.

Deep understanding has been termed "authoritative, connected knowing" and requires of learners agency over their knowledge so that it can be flexibly recreated across contexts, rather than simply reproduced in form (Greeno, 2006). Summarising research on transfer of learning from a situated learning lens, Greeno suggests the notion of "conceptual agency" to describe the way an actor uses and chooses "material or conceptual resources, which are appropriated, adapted or modified for a purpose in the agent's activity" (Greeno, 2006, p. 538). Such agency potentially arises from positioning of the role of the learner – treating conceptual resources as modifiable by framing the activity as one which the agent has the power to shape.

Classrooms, as environments, can be constructed in ways that either afford or constrain such transfer of learning (Greeno, Smith, & Moore, 1993). Constraints may arise from experiences or contexts that suppress the conditions necessary for transfer, such as conceptual agency and the development of situated meanings. In general, transfer is afforded by learners' perceptions of similarity and difference between contexts. Such inter-contextuality might be afforded in a number of ways. Particular features within classrooms might offer "focusing phenomena" (Lobato, Ellis, & Munoz, 2003), which serve to cue relevant prior knowledge. Alternatively, classroom programmes have the potential to "frame" knowledge as relevant in certain contexts and across time. Additionally, teachers can work to "frame" students as authors of knowledge, thus making them accountable to that knowledge within the classroom learning community (Engle, 2006).

## **INTERTEXTUALITY AND THE TRANSFER OF LITERACY LEARNING**

Texts cannot be separated from the social and cultural realities within which, and from which, they are constructed. In this sense, any text will address not only the reader, but also the network of other texts with which it interacts, as one voice among a background of many existing voices (Bakhtin, 1981). This interaction among texts has been termed "intertextuality" (Kristeva, 1980), and references the relational nature of meaning-making, and the multi-voiced nature of all texts. Due to the focus on relationships between texts, an instructional focus on intertextuality, in our view, has potential to afford transfer of textual knowledge in classrooms. Thus we see potential in the concept of intertextuality from the point of view of literacy learning.

Kristeva's notion of intertextuality identifies the way that texts can be connected, in an exponential network of connection between texts, drawn from multiple sources, echoing and building upon one another (see, for example, Nelson, 2008). Hence references to other texts are an inherent feature of all texts (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993; Hartman, 1995; Lemke, 1992). If applied to literacy learning, theories of intertextuality "frame" reading and writing as inter-contextual, in that authors of texts, intentionally or otherwise, draw from the voices of others when creating their own texts. Intertextual references may be to individual texts or "intertexts" (Lemke, 1992), but they may also be references to more than one text at a time, potentially to whole classes or genres of previous texts (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993).

We would argue that the notion of intertextuality, appropriated for educational purposes, has important implications for instruction. Firstly, writers either use, could use or arguably need to use their knowledge of a variety of texts as a resource for writing. As writers, they might carefully draw on such knowledge strategically when composing, thereby acquiring increasingly flexible expertise. Secondly, writers' various sources of knowledge depend on individual intertextual histories; intertextuality is necessarily idiosyncratic (Cairney, 1992). Because of idiosyncrasy, it is essential that children's various intertextual connections and the variety of voices from which they voice their own texts, are understood, valued or taken up by teachers (Harris & Trezise, 1999) and by the education system more widely (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

Instruction that explicitly accounts for the intertextual nature of literacy knowledge would therefore focus on identifying existing knowledge of texts, expanding students' intertextual histories and building discourse knowledge. Potentially, explicit identification of individual intertextual connections would cue the prior learning necessary to make meaning in the current text, thus facilitating incorporation of the familiar. Additionally, classroom activities can be designed to build a shared intertextual history. By developing this common intertextual history to locate discussions about texts, teachers might guide learners in developing intertextual understandings within that shared history, thereby building new knowledge, that is, unlocking the unfamiliar.

For teachers and designers of curriculum, an appreciation of the intertextual nature of literacy learning arguably has important implications. Firstly, such knowledge builds cognisance of the divergent intertextual histories of the poly-contextual participants in lessons, and the necessarily multi-voiced nature of the texts students write. Secondly, teachers might develop an awareness of the intertextual positioning created by teaching, and a similar awareness of one's own intertextual agenda. Finally, pedagogy might position reading and writing as dialogic, at the same time positioning students as agentive participants in such a dialogue. These implications, we argue, offer a framework for incorporating students' resources, as well as building textual knowledge, in ways that value the multi-voiced nature of students' writing, and resist conceptions that frame textual knowledge as school-based forms.

Therefore, we argue here that intertextual understandings have the potential for providing a discourse about writing that may afford transfer of literacy learning. Intertextuality provides a basis for making reading/writing links in classrooms, as well as making prior knowledge links to texts from students' other contexts. If we

apply the research into transfer to the textual knowledge that is built when reading and applied in writing, then theory suggests that learners' ability to draw on prior knowledge requires reading and writing to be perceived and framed as inter-contextual. In this regard, theories of intertextuality offer a frame for such inter-contextuality in two ways. Firstly, there is an inherent reading/writing link in building knowledge about texts and relationships between texts. Secondly, there is a strategic link between reading and writing when students draw on their reading as a composition strategy for writing. So, learners can legitimately be given permission to draw critically from other texts as an aid to composition and comprehension. Potentially, this allows a shift in the educational discourse about writing: from writing as either "creating" or "imitating" to writing as "appropriating" tools for one's own purposes; a shift which has important implications for both teaching and assessment of students' writing.

## **OBSERVED INTERTEXTUAL PRACTICES**

The evidence discussed here is taken from case studies of four effective primary school teachers of writing (Jesson, 2010). These teachers participated in a wider intervention which operated in six schools across two years and built teachers' knowledge of texts and writing in order to accelerate student achievement in writing. Working within a schooling improvement context, the intervention aimed to raise student achievement as measured by the assessment tools in use in the participating schools.

As a conceptual underpinning of the professional development intervention, intertextual theories and their pedagogical implications were discussed in a series of eight workshops. During the course of the intervention, teachers worked to design instruction with an explicitly intertextual focus, and four effective teachers were video-recorded teaching writing for a term each. Analysis of the case studies revealed a number of recurring intertextual practices that arose, and the focus here is on the ways that these practices may have operated to afford transfer of learning for the learners in these culturally diverse classes. These practices included encouraging students to "borrow" authors' techniques for their own rhetorical ends; constructing classroom tools which were based on reading, but designed to be used when writing; using multiple texts and textual references in building textual knowledge and finally embedding opportunities for authentic, non-brokered discussion between students and their teacher. In this discussion we seek to highlight the potential of such intertextual pedagogical practices for the transfer of literacy learning about texts, gained through reading, to application in writing.

### **Intertextual teaching practice one: Borrowing as a strategy**

The practice, described here as teaching "borrowing as a strategy", was that whereby teachers explicitly gave students permission to "borrow" the techniques of authors, but to shape them to fit students' own ends. In the following example, such permission was given by the teacher, who explicitly engaged the students in settings in different narrative passages with the express purpose of borrowing,

So we'll have a look at the difference between the descriptions of that setting, and look at how it changed, and hopefully you'll be able to take some of those ideas (Classroom observation, 5 September, 2007).

Such invocation of borrowing as a writing strategy theoretically provided a number of affordances for transfer of textual knowledge. The strategy expressly referenced the inter-contextuality of reading and writing, due to the use of texts as sites for inquiry into writing and sources for writing techniques. When students, later while writing, were reminded to “borrow” these same literary devices for their writing, the strategy served to reference the relevance of students’ prior textual knowledge, the familiar, as a resource from which students might borrow. Additionally a number of practices were associated with the permission to borrow in these classes. These included supporting students’ reading of texts to identify techniques that might be borrowed. Also, as part of this support for reading, teachers used and taught meta-language in context to enable talk about texts, potentially enabling generalisable textual knowledge. Importantly for “transfer out”, borrowing for writing identified the potential application of the knowledge gained through text analysis activities, through an explicit statement of purpose, that is, its applicability in students’ own writing.

While models of writing are often cited as an effective tool in the teaching of writing, the notion of “borrowing” potentially repositions the relationship between learner and published writer, towards one that offers more conceptual agency to the learner. Designed well, borrowing from authors might play out slightly differently from emulating good models (cf, Graham, 2010). In particular, the student agency inherent in deciding what to borrow holds potential for critical reading needed to evaluate what might be worth borrowing from a given text.

### **Intertextual teaching practice two: Creating texts as tools**

Teachers in the observed classes worked with their students to co-construct “scaffolds” or tools for writing. These artefacts, including charts, writing frames, checklists and posters were created by students as the products of their textual investigations, as in this example:

Teacher:

Just behind the board...there is a big huge, orange [sheet of] cardboard up there. So as I walked around yesterday, I had a look at some of your highlighted words, words that you identified, were really amazing, from that text. Okay and we are going to put them up there [on the orange sheet of cardboard]. And what we are really going to try hard to do this term, we are going to try really hard to understand the vocab [vocabulary] and use the vocab again. Even though it's not the words that we thought of, because we didn't come up with any of these words, the authors came up with them, but that doesn't mean we can't use them. Ok, we can borrow some ideas and put them into the stories that we write... (Classroom observation, 23 July, 2007)

In each of the classes, such student-made writing tools were displayed on walls, glued into writing books, or kept nearby the teaching station for access. The classroom environment, wall displays and students’ books were in this way used as a support for writing, rather than as a celebration of work products. In each of the following

examples, the teacher refers students to a text, which was jointly created, based on students' reading in an earlier lesson.

### ***Example one***

Teacher: We did something about a limpet sticking to a rock – I can't remember what. [*The teacher reaches back to the workbook and chart made during that previous lesson.*]

Child: I stuck to my position...

Teacher: ...like a limpet sticks to a rock...

(Classroom observation, 5 September, 2007)

### ***Example two***

Teacher: And a little challenge up there as well – to try and use the checklist that we developed last week for a narrative.

(Classroom observation, 30 August 2007)

### ***Example three***

Teacher: Do you remember doing the data chart with me last week? It was this one, right?

[*The teacher flicks back through teacher's workbook.*]

(Classroom observation, 21 August 2007)

Charts such as these offer vital support for writers. In transfer terms, they offer a link between learning situations, as “focussing phenomena” (Lobato et al., 2003) in writing classes. Possibly, however, it was the student participation in authorship of the chart that provided the required authoritative positioning of the learner necessary for transfer. Creating a chart from one's own reading, for future use, is potentially a qualitatively different use of support than relying on a commercially produced writing “support”. Creation of one's own tool, based on induction from actual texts, might offer learners authority over this reified knowledge, so that they might flexibly adapt what is written on the charts, checklists and frames in ways they do not have the power to do over ready-made supports. By asking students to record their learning about texts in the form of a tool, teachers may have afforded transfer by positioning students as “authors” of their own learning.

### **Intertextual teaching practice three: Multiple texts**

The teachers in these classes worked with students to develop textual knowledge over multiple texts. Alongside multiple examples of published texts and the student-made textual supports previously described, teachers also referred students to the writing of other class members. Two examples follow which illustrate the use of multiple texts. In the first, the group is working on planning the features of a character “Dan”, who might figure in a future story. The teacher makes references to another group's brainstorm, recorded on a chart. She also refers to two published texts that students had previously analysed with respect to character description. In the second, the group is discussing how they might decide whether their narratives are complete. They identify a number of strategies and associated textual supports they might call on as aids.

**Example one:**

I want show you yesterday's group's work, what they came up with... They brainstormed some clothes that "Dan" wore, some personality traits, of their own Dan, attitude of their own Dan, and physical appearance [*teacher records this on own brainstorm*] so think of some words that would describe your character...

They talked about personality. They talked about the clothes that their character liked to wear. They talked about physical appearance, and attitude... Culture – you might think about your Dan's culture. If you think back to the description of Miss [character name], we got lots and lots and lots about her physical appearance. They talked about the size of her legs. I wonder what Dan's legs are like? If you think back to [character name], try to use some of those ideas that you came up with. We talked about his socks and his hair and his ears...

Just build the character; he's your character...

(Classroom observation, 21 August, 2007)

**Example two:**

Teacher: Ok – so a complete narrative, how are we going to be successful at that WALT ["We Are Learning To" – the Learning Intention for that group]. What do we need to be able to do?

Student: Plan

Teacher: What could we use to help us plan?

Student: The **checklist**

Teacher: Ok, what else? When we read stories, what do we use?

Student: Use the **author's techniques**

Student: Conferencing

Teacher: We could use the **conference checklist**

Teacher: What else can we use?

Student: **Old stories**

Teacher: Old stories? For guidance?

Student: Other ideas

Teacher: Your imagination

Teacher: What else can we use to help us plan this out? ...What type of mapping have we used before?

Student: **Story maps**

Teacher: Have you all done a story map before? What else do we do....?

Student: **Brainstorms**

Teacher: So you think to be successful at writing a complete narrative we are going to have to plan? [*Discussion continues*]

(Classroom observation, 30 August, 2007)

The use of multiple examples theoretically provides learners with increased textual experience, thereby building deeper but also more nuanced understanding. Importantly, the use of multiple texts offers learners the opportunity to refine their understandings by making comparisons and links between texts. Direct experience with similar concepts in a number of contexts affords what Gee (2001) called situated meanings, those that are anchored in enough contexts to allow for useable knowledge.

### **Intertextual teaching practice four: Opportunities for discussion**

Opportunities for discussion are ubiquitous in classrooms. However, opportunities for discussion with the teacher are often characterised by protocols of turn-taking and permission to speak. In the observed classes, however, all teachers created situations, usually small group activities, where students could speak at will about texts. In the following example, students have been reading aloud their descriptions of animals. One student's animal is fictional, an intertextual link to a movie creature.

- Student: It's a ti-gon.  
 Student: That's what we said.  
 Teacher: A ti-gon?  
 Student: ti-gon.  
 Student: What's a ti-gon?  
 Student: It's a type of half lion...  
 Student: Is it real?  
 Student: Yes. it is real. [*Discussion continues*]  
 (Classroom observation, 27 November, 2007)

Such opportunities for discussion seemed to be the main pedagogical tool used to link to prior knowledge and experiences. It can only be theorised whether this student's intertextual links would have been "taken up" (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993) in a more formal classroom speaking context, in a whole class session, for example. In this context of free turn taking, the link definitely sparks reaction. What is important to this discussion of transfer is the positioning of the learner as one who is allowed to call upon prior textual experience and bring it into the classroom context, irrespective of the teacher's intertextual agenda (or possibly, more correctly, as a result of the teacher's intertextual agenda to allow students to make such links).

### **DISCUSSION: AN INTERTEXTUAL FOCUS TO AFFORD GENERALISABLE LEARNING ABOUT TEXTS**

The observed intertextual teaching practices seem promising in terms of building generalisable learning about language in a number of ways. Combined, these practices seem to reposition the relationship of learners to texts. They offer a shift in the way learners can be framed in writing pedagogy, particularly with respect to their conceptual agency. Using intertextuality as the basis for pedagogical understanding, learners could be framed as agentic appropriators of knowledge resources, and the creators of their own learning tools. The observed practices also afforded opportunities to develop situated meanings, by identifying the inter-contextuality of reading and writing and by offering multiple examples, giving opportunities for students to reconceptualise their understandings.

We argue that the described practices offer potentially powerful refinements to current instruction for diverse learners in an effort to both incorporate the familiar and unlock the unfamiliar. We argue further that such refinements to instruction might work to value the multi-voicedness of students' writing, affirming the value of teaching to build discourse knowledge, but without constraining such knowledge to prototypical or sanctioned forms.

Currently, cognitive approaches to writing instruction focus on strategy instruction and writing processes, through cycles of planning, translating and reviewing. Potentially, attention to process may de-prioritise knowledge about texts, resulting in silence with regard to the textual knowledge needed for writing success. In diverse contexts, such silences might thereby marginalise students whose cultural and textual history diverges from that of the school and the mainstream, and privilege students who can, through acquisition rather than instruction, draw from previous experience with school-like texts (Bloome, Katz & Champion, 2003; Kress, 1999). However, researchers within this field do identify the importance of knowledge for writing. In working with texts, the goal is to “provide students with good examples of specific kinds of writing... students are encouraged to emulate the models...” (Graham, 2010, p. 134). As we have argued, for transfer of learning to occur, emulation might not be the appropriate goal. A goal of emulation might potentially constrain transfer by denying learners the agency to recreate knowledge resources in flexible ways.

On the other hand, approaches to writing which focus on genre knowledge centre explicitly on building knowledge about texts. Potentially, the knowledge captured by descriptions of the features of particular types of writing, can be presented as an abstraction (in a list of features or writing frame). Pedagogy which bases direct instruction upon such abstractions potentially de-situates knowledge entirely, thereby constraining transfer. Alternatively, instruction may focus on prototypical texts which illustrate the described features (for example, Gadd, 2006). In terms of transfer of learning, however, there seems to be a danger in relying on prototypical texts constructed to illustrate school-based forms. While the applicability of learning these dominant forms relates to schooling success, such instruction frames writing as encompassing only school-based writing forms divorced from the texts students really read, either in other contexts, or even in school (see Cazden, 1993). Thus students’ writing is no longer inter-contextual with students’ reading. Incorporation of students’ resources is potentially constrained; prior knowledge that is valued is restricted to the textual knowledge learned in writing lessons. Again, the imposition of models to emulate provides little room for student creativity or student authority (Janks, 2009).

The observation of the case study teachers has highlighted some ways that teachers may have worked to overcome such constraints. Because these teachers were attempting to design instruction that had an intertextual focus, they incorporated the teaching of composing strategies which explicitly drew on situated textual knowledge. Students investigated texts and were given permission to appropriate the features of texts that worked to achieve their own authorial purpose. Thus we observed a slight shift in the framing of learners, from those who need to be taught the features of texts, to those who, as authors, might choose to borrow the authorial techniques of writers.

We argue, therefore, that intertextual understandings have the potential to redesign writing instruction in ways that afford transfer. Such refinements include textual inquiry (by students, with authority to talk, over multiple examples, resulting in tools for writing). By situating knowledge about writing within the reading and analysis of actual texts, we see potential for developing flexible understandings. In such ways, instruction might work to build situated and authoritative textual knowledge. We offer a view of intertextuality as affording culturally responsive teaching through incorporation and unlocking of textual knowledge for learners, in ways that current instruction may constrain.

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