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Abstract

Students in the 21st Century are living in an increasingly globalised and multicultural society. In order to interact productively in society, it is essential for students to develop an understanding of, and respect for, cultures different from their own. This paper will examine how web 2.0 technologies and children's literature can be used as tools to promote intercultural understandings in the classroom. The author will provide specific examples and applications of these resources within the Australian primary school context, which encourage meaningful discussion and critical thinking. The article will conclude with exploring the conjunction of web 2.0 technologies and children's literature, for learning that travels across the globe.

Across the globe: Promoting intercultural understandings in the classroom through sharing stories

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Students in the 21st Century are living in an increasingly globalised and multicultural society. In order to interact productively in society, it is essential for students to develop an understanding of, and respect for, cultures different from their own. This paper will examine how web 2.0 technologies and children's literature can be used as tools to promote intercultural understandings in the classroom. The author will provide specific examples and applications of these resources within the Australian primary school context, which encourage meaningful discussion and critical thinking. The article will conclude with exploring the conjunction of web 2.0 technologies and children's literature, for learning that travels across the globe.

   Keywords: Intercultural understandings; multicultural education; web 2.0
   technologies; children's literature; communication; National Curriculum

In our globalised world, those of us who live in our comfortable houses … are merely a stone's throw away from vast depths of injustice and inequality on the other side of the fence of our own making … We need especially to be able to listen to writers and storytellers who are themselves from across the fence. (Naidoo, 2005, p.249).

Introduction

A recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Koziol, 2012) audaciously suggested that Australians are not as tolerant as they think they are. Racist sentiments are reflected in talkback radio, politics and the media, with expressed caution and criticism of welfare, asylum seekers and immigrants (Koziol, 2012). Yet Australian students are living in an increasingly globalised and multicultural society. Developing an understanding of different cultures and perspectives is, therefore, essential for becoming informed and culturally responsive citizens who are equipped to make positive contributions to society (Hossain & Aydin, 2011; Kelley, 2008; Maguth & Hilburn, 2011; Meyer & Rhoades, 2006; Ocak, 2006). The inclusion of different cultural perspectives in teaching leads to a more harmonious classroom, as the students' cultural backgrounds are validated and understood (Baskerville, 2011; Hossain & Aydin, 2011).

   A strong connection can be made between the inclusion of cultural perspectives and the NSW Quality Teaching Model (NSW DET, 2003), which

encourages the teaching of cultural knowledge from diverse social groupings. Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Asian studies are included as cross-curriculum priorities in the forthcoming National Curriculum. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are part of the world's oldest existing cultures. Their strong spiritual connection to country, diverse language groups, detailed kinship structures and history that spans thousands of years, form an inherent part of Australian history and culture. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priority, therefore, ensures that learners gain a well-rounded and rich understanding of Australia. Similarly, Australia's strong links with Asia, through geography, trading and migration, has justified the inclusion of the Asia and Australia's engagement, with Asia priority (National Curriculum Board, 2009).

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2011) advocates the inclusion of these cross-curriculum priorities, viewing them as opportunities to develop intercultural understandings and respect. They believe that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priority is a positive step toward achieving reconciliation and responding to the ongoing inequality experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. Whilst the AHRC is supportive of the Asia priority, they expressed concerns of the curriculum's narrow focus on the economic benefits of Australia's relationship with Asia. The AHRC encourages a broader scope to be adopted, in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of Asian culture. For example, an exploration of the experiences and discrimination faced by Australians of Asian descent.

Web 2.0 technologies and children's literature can be utilised to stimulate critical thinking and meaningful dialogue when introducing cultural perspectives in the classroom. In particular, these resources provide opportunities to introduce critical literacy practices. Critical literacy involves learners delving deeper into texts, viewing them from multiple perspectives and questioning ideological assumptions (Kern, 2007; Myers & Eberfors, 2010). This is especially important for the teaching of global perspectives, as students need to be able to critically and respectfully discuss cultural issues such as human migration (Hossain & Aydin, 2011). In Killen's view, the "construction of ideas is aided by systematic, open-minded discussions and debates" (2009, p.7). Meaningful social interactions and communication in learning also create significance for the learners, thereby resulting in increased engagement (Robinson & Kakela, 2006).

Web 2.0 technologies

Web 2.0 technologies include internet applications such as blogs, wikis and social networking sites, which allow for instant publishing on the web without formal knowledge of programming. This technology has opened doors in terms of communication, making it possible to interact and share stories with people from a range of backgrounds and experiences (Baumbach, 2009; Kist *et al.*, 2010). In the classroom, blogs and wikis can act as electronic penpal initiatives, allowing students to share their personal experiences with students across the globe and engage in meaningful dialogue as they ask questions of interest. These interactions develop students' skills in critical literacy, as they are presented with multiple perspectives to consider (Myers & Eberfors, 2010).

Online discussions can also broaden students' worldview, as they are encouraged to see the similarities between cultures and develop a respect for, and understanding of, the differences (Meyer & Rhoades, 2006). The slight distancing created through email exchange in contrast to face-to-face encounter, can help to eliminate racial biases and develop friendships without factors such as skin colour getting in the way (Austin, 2011). Web 2.0 technologies can be utilised by the teacher from the classroom, thereby providing a safe, engaging and effective tool for promoting intercultural understandings in teaching (Hossain & Aydin, 2011; Kist *et al.*, 2010).

Promoting intercultural understandings does not need to solely focus on people living on the other side of the world. Exploration of the cultural identities of people living in the local community is also of great value. When teachers use the local community as a way of fostering cultural understandings, the learning is significant and meaningful for the students (Maguth & Hilburn, 2011). Students should be taught to see the connections and interactions between different cultures that result from living in a global community (Curriculum Corporation, 2008). For example, students could research different festivities such as Bar Mitzvah, Thanksgiving and Christmas and their significance to particular groups and individuals living in Australia. Students could use web 2.0 tools, such as websites and blogs, to engage in an inquiry task where they interview people from different cultural backgrounds, to discover their stories and gain insight into their sense of identity (BoS, 2006a).

Creating a website or blog allows for greater collaboration in learning, as the students can work on the same publication concurrently and are able to read their peers' ideas (Stephens & Collins, 2007). The real audience created through publication values the students' writing, giving all students a voice and increasing task authenticity and engagement (Baumbach, 2009; Kist *et al.*, 2010). The blog can also act as an electronic learning log, allowing students to record and reflect on their developing understandings of a different culture (Moore-Hart, 2004). Furthermore, web 2.0 technologies provide flexibility in use, as they are accessible from both school and home contexts.

The teacher can draw upon these features of web 2.0 technologies to invite critical thinking and meaningful discussion. For example, they can set up a peer review, where the students are taught to provide constructive criticism of each other's writing (Luckin *et al.*, 2009). The students may challenge their peers' interpretations of others' cultures, such as implicit or explicit cultural biases, and offer insights gained through research or personal experience (Myers & Eberfors, 2010). The learning possibilities with web 2.0 technologies are virtually limitless and are only bound by the creativity and facilitation of the teacher.

Children's literature

Children's literature can also be used as a springboard for exploring different cultures and broadening students' perspectives (Kelley, 2008; Naidoo, 2005; Potter *et al.*, 2009). Quality children's literature opens the door to children's imagination and engages them at both a socio-emotional and cognitive level (Potter *et al.*, 2009). In this way, the sharing of stories helps students to understand and empathise with

different cultures and experiences. However, when selecting literature to use, it is imperative to consider whether it is an accurate depiction of the culture, rather than a shallow or stereotypical representation (Livingston & Kurkjian, 2005; Louie, 2006). This can be determined by researching whether individuals from the culture support the literature and determine it to be true (Kelley, 2008; Louie, 2006). The stories shared do not always need to be light and enjoyable, but should, rather, focus on developing students' understanding and empathy and inspiring action (Zhi-Lu, 2006). Stories that expose the realities and hardships of different communities are, therefore, encouraged to be shared in the classroom. Including a broad scope of literature in the classroom is the first step toward teaching critical literacy, exposing students to different realities (Kern 2007).

Jeannie Baker's *Mirror* (2010) is an effective text for introducing students to a different culture. It is a parallel story of two boys living in different communities, one in Sydney, Australia, and one in Morocco, North Africa. The story is told predominantly through pictures, providing opportunities to develop skills in visual literacy and research. The author's intention was not only to examine the differences between the two cultures and experiences, but to also draw attention to the similarities. For example, the lives of the two boys are mirrored as they are shown travelling to school. However, whilst the Australian boy travels by car through the congested streets of Sydney, the Moroccan boy travels by donkey through an arid, desert landscape. Through a focus on the connections between the two cultures, the book is able to develop an understanding of and respect for the Moroccan culture (Louie, 2006).

Children's literature can also be used to examine the spiritual identities of social, cultural or religious groups. The NSW HSIE and Creative Arts syllabi allow opportunities to do so, through their incorporation of "general religious education" (BoS 2006a, p.5) and exploration of "social and cultural values about spiritual and worldly beliefs in Australia and in other regions and cultures" (BoS 2006b, p.6) through art forms. For example, a study of Aboriginal Dreaming stories can provide insight into the Aboriginal people's relationships and interactions with the land and animals (Connor, 2007).

The Ngarrindjeri Dreaming story 'Thukeri' illustrates the deep spiritual connection that the Aboriginal people have to the land. 'Thukeri' tells the story of two fishermen who catch a plethora of fish and yet, in their selfishness, do not share with a hungry stranger. The men are punished by the Great Spirit Ngarrindjeri for their greediness, as the fish are found to be inedible, due to the many sharp, thin bones in their flesh. The key ideas and morals that are conveyed in the story include the capacity to live off the land, importance of only taking what is needed and of sharing resources with others (Miers, 2010). This Dreaming story provides an opportunity for meaningful discussion and reflection, as students consider significant topics, such as the need to care for the environment and others, and examine how different cultures respond to this issue.

The conjunction of web 2.0 technologies and children's literature

At the heart of promoting intercultural understandings is the need to listen to and understand people's stories. Stories are a vehicle for sharing ideas, values and

experiences, and connecting with others (Baskerville, 2011; Mathias, 2001). Web 2.0 technologies and children's literature both enable stories to be heard and shared in the classroom, opening doors to meaningful discussion. Using these resources to complement one another can result in a richer understanding of a culture (Moore-Hart, 2004). For example, after reading *Mirror* (Baker, 2010), the teacher could set up a blog to communicate with a class in Africa. This would allow for an examination of the book's accuracy, thereby building skills in research, literacy and critical thinking. The students could also share their personal experiences of different cultures, sharing the traditions and customs that they have participated in and the values that are transmitted.

The effectiveness of web 2.0 technologies and children's literature is strongly dependent upon the role of the teacher. Teachers need to establish a safe classroom environment that cultivates the sharing of ideas, questioning and probing, along with cultural sensitivity. As demonstrated in a case study conducted in a New Zealand school (Baskerville, 2011), these outcomes can be achieved through building positive relationships with the students, holding high expectations of their capabilities and modelling the desired behaviours and skills. The study also introduced the storytelling circle, where the physical positioning of the students and teachers in a circle was representative of their equal status as knowledge bearers (Baskerville, 2011). Drawing upon students' prior knowledge can help to establish meaningful connections between the stories and the students' own lives (Mathias, 2001).

Conclusion

In an increasingly globalised and multicultural society, it is fundamental for educators to include a broad range of cultural perspectives in the classroom. Utilising available resources, including web 2.0 technologies and children's literature, enables meaningful and significant learning to take place in the classroom. Children's literature allows students to become immersed in a culture different from their own, whilst web 2.0 technologies enable students to share their own personal stories and listen to the firsthand experiences of others. Through effective teacher facilitation, these resources can provide invaluable learning experiences for students, while inviting critical thinking and meaningful discussion that can lead to an understanding and respect for cultures across the globe.

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