

New Basics, Old Basics and Teacher Education: Working Among the ‘Walking Wounded’ from the Literacy Wars

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Abstract

Writing about pedagogic practices to enhance the literacy of children abounds in university libraries; much of this writing centres on the issue of method and what works best. In Australia, more recent work has moved past this singular thing called literacy to a range of literacies young people might need in the fast capital economies of C-21. Yet, incongruously, the populist debate about literacy standards and issues of method continues; ‘back to basics’ or ‘whole language’, a focus on phonics or meaning, which is going to win out in the rush to blame the other and claim victory ?

The battle between these polarised groups, the ‘literacy wars’(I take some liberty with the military/conflict metaphor here), are now in the second generation of ‘walking wounded’. These are the victims, the children and adults (including some teachers) who have survived (or not) the ‘literacy wars’. Many have been caught in the cross-fire of method debate, too often left wanting in the literacy stakes.

One group central to this paper is the young adults who have recently finished high school, many with good passes in Senior English but with a very limited repertoire of literacy competencies; I have particular concern about those who have chosen to enter teacher education programs. These new ‘refugees’ often bring too little baggage in the form of literacy competence, in the *lingua franca* of most Australian universities, Standard Australian English, to support them in this career choice. Far too many are unable to perform the most fundamental reading and writing tasks one might expect of high school graduates. What happened here? What do we do? How do we prepare these ‘victims’ to teach others the freedom of literate ways beyond their own ability to be so literate ? What about the new literacies for new times ? I consider some of these issues in this paper.

Preamble

This paper is located in the theme, *Rethinking Professional Practice in Teacher Education*, directed at the conference strands of *reflecting on practice* and *changing curricula in teacher education*. My professional interest is broadly in the field of literacy and particularly the role of literacy as access to knowledge and social power. This situates literacy in a multiple role of serving one’s needs as a user of existing texts and knowledge while at other times as creator oneself of new, fruitful and personally purposeful knowledge. Consistent with the much-used often abused term of ‘lifelong learner’, reflection on one’s own practice as teacher educator is ever more vital in this regard as we attempt to visualise a future which young people in school today might face as adults and the role of literacy in those lived futures.

Looking at Literacies in Teacher Education

The working definition of literacy used in this paper is currently used in Queensland policy documents, encompassing the concept of literacy as being personal, multiple and eclectic. The definition comes from the *Literate Futures* (2000) paper which documents findings of a major review, chaired by Professor Allan Luke, undertaken in Queensland recently and sets out the State's future 'literacy strategy' in a comprehensive and informed way. Literacy is defined as "... *the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print, and multimedia*" (p. 9).

I advance issues around this concept of literacy as a 'repertoire' and what that means for teachers in times of considerable social change. Questions are posed of the literacy repertoire demanded of students to succeed in their preservice studies, the professional literacy demands required of these teachers on graduation, the repertoire of practices that need to be explicated when working with children in schools who are developing their own repertoire of literate skills. Several questions are raised for further study as this initial stage of the research is reported.

Rationalising the Military Metaphor

When it came time to write the abstract for this paper something happened, which for me, as one whose early adult years were shaped by participating in Viet Nam war protests, was ideologically distasteful. A 'military' theme emerged, incubated by the term 'literacy or reading wars', which persists in the literature (eg. Goodman, 1998; Quigley, 1997). Perhaps, too, the violent events that occurred during 2001 and which drove a return to militaristic fervour, delightfully absent for the past decade or so, in my 'world' at least, shaped my thinking. For whatever reason, the military metaphor seemed to fit uncomfortably yet neatly with the issues so I gave in to the literary pressure and let the military discourse prevail.

The term '*literacy wars*' refers to the 'great debate' (Luke, 1998) around questions of the best method for the teaching of reading and writing; do we need more phonics or is whole language the way to go? Is the salvation of the poor reader a return to 'the basics' or should we focus on the richness of children's literature? The great debate of '*literacy wars*' influenced my thinking and nurtured the military metaphor. I also use the term the '*walking wounded*' in my title; I deliberated at length about using that term and decided that it fit the military metaphor and suited the meta-narrative informing the finished paper so it stayed.

This choice of metaphor reflects concerns I have for the future and the people most immediately effected by what they imply; for me now, these people are my students who one day will become classroom teachers. These people had lived during the years of this on-going debate, the '*literacy wars*'; I saw them as its victims, the '*walking wounded*' who had gone through school over the past decade or two, during the term of this 'conflict'.

The Research Context

The focus group of this study, then, is the cohort of students who enter their first year of study in preservice education at James Cook University on the Cairns campus. In 2001, of the 199 students in this initial cohort, there was a rather neat and even split in

this population between recent school-leavers, which I have defined as those who finished Senior in the previous two years, and the other half, which included students with an average of over eleven years since last attendance in school; this distributed between three and thirty-six years, on an individual basis.

I was interested in these two groupings of students because of occurrences over the years, not unique to Education but true in other programs as well, in which there was a marked difference in general academic success, with far too many school-leavers under-performing. I was curious to know what role literacy competencies had to play in this discrepancy. We already knew the potential impact on academic success of such external factors as paid work demands, family commitments, financial pressures and so, based on research undertaken earlier. Yet there seemed to be other things, particularly related to academic reading and writing, which I had seen emerging as also being vitally important with similar negative impacts on academic outcomes.

My research interests over the last several years have included critical reflection on my own pedagogy, student reactions to this and the content I present in several subjects I teach involving language and literacies in the teaching profession (Wilson, 1996; Wilson & Klein, 2000). There has been a series of events which occurred over the last few years that consolidated in 2001 and incorporated some confounding pictures, particularly as it relates to personal literacies of students.

The picture which began to focus my *gaze* was the repertoire of literacy practices that students in our preservice teacher education program, across all year levels, were able to call upon at various times and for varying purposes. Not surprisingly of course, as would be true of any gathering of people in any context, there was considerable variation in these repertoires and levels of complexity and flexibility. What was quite surprising, however, was just how diverse the range of these practices were and, in particular, the sorts of things that seemed to be absent for so many; it is these absences which caused the disturbance for me and which has initiated the research described in this paper.

The Absences

In order to elaborate what I describe as the *absences*, it is useful to see what has been assumed to be *present* and why. Many of these assumptions are imbedded in the entry requirements for access to teacher education programs in most Australian universities. One of these is demonstration of a reasonable level of being literate, using such things as a Senior English result or the writing of a minor essay to confirm these competencies. Such indicators are meant to enable academic staff to assume a minimum level of reading comprehension and writing ability to enable students to access the content of subjects through a reading program and complete assessment tasks through various spoken and written text forms.

A number of events recently had led me to ponder the validity of the assumptions involved in such demonstrations of ability. These events included my own observations of the extent to which so many written papers from students seemed to lack the 'typical' literacy competencies one might expect from university students. These included such things as spelling and grammatical conventions, coherence and logical presentation of ideas, use of external sources to support arguments and the

like. Nor were these confined to writing; difficulties related to reading academic texts in preparation for this writing and tutorial discussion also seemed to present. This had the effect of silencing those students who may have had made several attempts to 'read' the material without success.

As I considered these absences more closely and inquired broadly among my colleagues about their observations, it became evident that this was a wide-spread concern. In order to understand this better and ensure that my observations were accurate, I interviewed students in various contexts about the things that were causing them trouble which invariably led to the range of experiences they had in schools related to the teaching of grammar, spelling and other conventions of the language or, in most cases, the *absence* of this.

I should point out that a number of students in this group for whom English is a second, third or even fourth language had self-identified through an initial survey that I do as a regular part of my subject orientation. For them many conventions of English were not a part of their repertoire so my expecting otherwise would be reminiscent of the bad old days when to be literate meant only in English while 'giving up one's mother tongue' (Harste, 1999); this is not a part of my pedagogy. and that is not what these absences are about.

The absences are in reference to the seemingly disproportionate number of native English-speaking Australians who have gone through school for twelve years, who have had good success in their studies, including their achievements in English, to meet the entry requirements of the degree. Despite these successes they have, in many cases, a very limited repertoire of literate practices in English. They are often not able to read the set texts with sufficient comprehension to understand the most superficial meanings in what we have assumed previously to be rather basic academic texts; nor can they write sufficiently coherent texts in order to express ideas informed by their reading in ways that are expected of them in academic writing that has seemed, for some time, appropriate to first year levels of assessment. These are all examples of the crucial *absences* to which I refer.

Anecdotal Episodes

I describe the following as 'anecdotal episodes' which, although a somewhat unusual way to describe research data, has informed the research and this paper in important ways. Indeed, I have chosen to write this paper using such things as the first person, the recount and other 'unconventional' forms of writing one would typically not expect to find in a 'learned' paper of the academic essay genre. However, I have done so in the belief that it may support better sustained reading and will be sharing the paper with my first year students to learn the extent that this form of writing is accessible to them. I am concerned that some level of 'dumbing down' of complex yet vital concepts of theory has occurred in some areas of University study due to a perceived weakness in the literacy repertoire of some students; working on ways to share those vital concepts in a variety of ways will help me in my teaching.

Episode One:

I teach a first year subject called Language and Literacies in Education, which is a

core subject for all first year students in Education. The purpose of the subject is to develop an understanding among students of language as a socio-cultural practice, that we all operate in a variety of discourses (Gee, 1990) based on our own lived experiences and that literacy is a multiple, non-neutral social practice that 'cuts people in or out' (Harste, 1999) of particular groups and contexts, dependent on one's literate repertoire. These ideas are all framed in terms of their implications for teachers and for the students they will teach over time.

Students react to these concepts in a variety of ways. One group, who are the majority, 'get it' fairly easily and are shaped by a range of understandings from the subject. There are others for whom these ideas are quite confronting and disruptive to the status quo which had previously offered them comfort in themselves as gendered, racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural beings. They, too, 'get it' but their discomfort creates ideological resistance to some of what they hear. As I have taught this subject and it has evolved over the years, many students have struggled with the difficult concepts of discourses, language and social power, multiple readings, truth as social construct, literacies as multiple, and other rather new and abstract ideas.

However, as I examined my own pedagogy further and my interpretation of students' reactions to this content, I began to realise that many were just not understanding what they were hearing and reading. The content was not accessible to them, thereby disabling a level of thinking which would allow them to consider and make an informed reaction as a consequence of this understanding. They were unable to read the articles that articulated these concepts in ways that opened the ideas to them for their scrutiny and then speak or write about these in any sustained way.

They have often said that they 'read' the paper several times and still had no idea of what they had read, which I'm sure many others have heard before; they were merely decoding and were unable to apply the further reading resources to the text. This was a revelation and explained some things which I had misinterpreted in the past. Too often I believed that those who didn't 'get it' had not bothered to read the text; how could they expect to know what the papers included if they hadn't even read it which, of course, was true of some, but not for all.

Many others had tried to read the papers, often several times, but were not able to move beyond the *text decoder* to the *meaning maker* and *text user* let alone the *text analyst* (Freebody & Luke, 1990). They were unable to apply a range of resources, to demonstrate a broader repertoire of literate practices which would, in turn, enable deeper understanding of the content. This inability to 'read' was a new experience for many students, all of whom had proven their literate abilities at school. Hadn't they, by accomplishing the minimum result in Senior English of Sound or better or some measure equivalent to this proven that to themselves and others? What had gone wrong?

Students who found themselves in this position were often quite devastated. Several of these students approached me after receiving a piece of marked assessment to find that it had a failed grade and commented that they are not accustomed to failing. They have had twelve years of fairly high levels of achievement at school and why had I failed them – what was wrong with me? I was inclined to remark that it was not me who had failed them; that somehow they were caught up in a system that sets a

hierarchy of progress using a 'generic' set of minimal benchmarks that reflect no particular person, a system where, as Ohanian (1999) describes it, 'one size fits few'. They were the 'walking wounded' complete with 'battle scars' and, until now, hadn't realised it.

Instead of saying this, of course, we would go over the written work together and, far too often, found that the reasons for the lack of success were a series of linguistic failures related to conventions of the technology of print and the syntactic structures which allow complex ideas to be understood, expressed and connected (Freebody & Luke, 1990). They had come up wanting in their depth of understanding and knowledge about how the language works; their repertoire of literate practices did not serve them as they had assumed it would and as it had in the past.

Now this is not surprising to most readers so far, I suspect. It appears to be a common 'theme' whenever such things as literacy standards are discussed. However, I am not one to buy the literacy standards' thing as such, since I see literacy not as an event along a continuum so much as it is more an eclectic ever-changing range of social practices for social purposes. What was surprising though is that a Sound in English could be achieved with such a limited repertoire of linguistic skills and knowledges.

Episode two:

I spent some time during 2001 travelling around Queensland, visiting schools and individual classrooms. While visiting one school I had the opportunity to observe a final year preservice teacher during the latter stages of her final practicum. She had a lovely Grade Three class in a suburban primarily white middle class school and was teaching a grammar lesson. It was a genre lesson on the recount with a focus on textual features, particularly the past tense of the verb as a convention of the recount.

I won't relate the details except to say that she introduced the concept of 'verb' by referring to it as 'circumstance of time' (a clear confusion over the functional grammar terms of 'circumstance' and 'process' without sufficient understanding of either concept). As the lesson proceeded it became very clear that this poor woman was trying to teach a lesson that included content about which she knew little. Each time a child shouted out a word they thought to be a verb, she had to decide if it was a verb or not, even though she didn't really know what a verb was. When a little fellow called out, quite correctly, the word 'did' he was told "No, that's a describing word."

When the lesson finished we had a little debrief and I asked my usual "What are your observations about how the lesson went?". She said she had no idea of the content, had never learned this in her own school days and had no real idea what I meant when I used the terms 'verb' and 'past tense' as the meta-language which would have supported this lesson.

To confound me even further, I met with the principal and deputy head of the school at the end of the day and we discussed the various preservice teachers each of us had observed over the day. I told them of this grammar lesson gone wrong and the concern I felt about this lack of content-knowledge. At this point they looked at each other and admitted that they doubt they would have done any better since they too had

missed out on any grammar during their days in school and didn't know the detail that was the content of this lesson.

Here was a group of very successful people, two proven professionals and one highly successful university student about to enter the profession. Yet here also were three people who, through no fault of their own, were unable to teach these things because they didn't themselves receive the explicit teaching that would have provided them with the metalanguage and knowledge to teach it to others. They were each able to do very well themselves, that is use the language effectively in a complex range of social situations but couldn't talk about that they knew 'intuitively'.

This was a clear and very important example of what Gee (1990) describes as the distinction between *acquisition* and *learning*:

“Acquisition is a process of acquiring something subconsciously by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching.... This is how most people come to control their first language.

Learning is a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching.... Or through certain life-experiences that trigger conscious reflection... breaking the thing to be learned into its analytic parts. It inherently involves attaining ...some degree of meta-knowledge about the matter.” p. 144

Gee goes on to say “We are better at *performing* what we *acquire*, but we *consciously* know more about what we have *learned*.” (p.144) This explains a great deal of what has occurred over the past decade or two with the polarisation of methods, the ‘literacy wars’, as described earlier. Those with experience in the ‘phonics/basics’ method may have experienced higher levels of *learning* about the language because of the direct teaching of such elements which worked well for some; those from the ‘whole language’ camp appear to have *acquired* considerable knowledge about *using* the language but little of the metalanguage associated with grammar instruction, for example, things which were *not* made explicit in so many classrooms with these results.

Episode three

During 2001 the literacy competencies of students in the School of Education at James Cook University had finally become a major focus of attention among the academic staff. It appeared to be a consistent problem that a significant proportion of students lacked the assumed literacy skills to perform the ‘typical’ tasks used in university to assess student performance such as essay writing. In one second year class of 285 students, 40 such students were identified for whom success in the subject was stifled by their inability to write a conventional sentence, link ideas in a coherent way, lacking the fundamental skills assumed to be essential for academic success based on their limited repertoire of literacy competence. Their failure in the subject was not necessarily about their understanding and knowledge of the subject content but the *absences* in the literacy required to develop and demonstrate their emerging understandings.

These students represent the extremes, those on the critical list among the ‘*walking wounded*’, but there were many more for whom the wounds were not so critical yet were quite debilitating, both in their written work and the capacity to read fluently beyond the decoding stage. The fact that these students were enrolled in a teacher education program in their second year was even more worrying. This compelled staff to organise a two-day workshop to examine broadly the literacy demands made across subjects, the assessment of these or assumption of their existence and further commitment to determine where to go with this knowledge at hand.

Episode four

I also spent some time in 2001 at Canadian universities with colleagues working in Schools of Education; the teacher preparation programs there are all two-year postgraduate studies in which all candidates have successfully completed an earlier degree. Entrance is highly competitive with strict quotas and candidates are of a high calibre with proven achievement academically.

Nonetheless, as we looked at similar issues related to literacy in that context we found the same sorts of things. There was a consistent level of shortcomings in the conventional use of the language and little understanding of the metalanguage that comes from a study of the language. There was also a strong parallel between the two countries in terms of the pedagogic methods which had dominated in schools over the past two to three decades, the sorts of debates about method occurring and the polarisation that has gone on in schools during that time; more evidence of the ‘walking wounded’ among our close allies. (As I prepare the final draft of this paper, a news item from Canada announcing an increase in ‘grammar instruction’ from Grade Four onwards beginning at the start of the next school year has just arrived in my Inbox – this can be viewed at http://novascotia.cbc.ca/clips/Novascotia/ram-lo/ns_gramfolo020115.ram)

A Teacher Educator’s Response To The ‘Great Debate’

These anecdotes may hold no new and startling revelations for many readers of this paper. They reflect concerns that have gone on among educators for some time and are generating a variety of responses in attempts to ‘do something’. One such major reaction, of course, is a cry for closer adherence to ‘standards’ of varying descriptions and, in many cases, a return to ‘the basics’, providing more fodder to inflame the ‘battle cries’ of the methods exponents on both sides. These are disappointing responses to what clearly is a concern that requires a more profound response; to reify the complexity of the issues involved in such minimal and essentialist ways is to perpetuate the injustices that are occurring in the name of the polarised groups.

Allan Luke makes the point in his paper *Getting Over Method* (1998,p.1) that the issue isn’t “... a story about triumph of method” but much more about resourcing of schools and teachers. It is also about the rate of “...economic, social and technological change” and the capacity of institutions such as schools to keep pace.

For those of us in the preparation-of-teachers business the same issues as Luke describes above are inseparable from our own work. The resource concern continues as a major national disgrace. (I am somehow reminded of Neil Postman's (1979, pp 3-5) allegory which he concludes with "How to improve education? Blow up the USS Wasp!" - it's worth a read). These huge resource woes are beyond the scope of this paper but the issue of social and technological change, as it relates to education and teacher preparation, are not.

It is time to reconsider the *assumptions* we make about our students as they come into the universities and what it is they bring with them in their repertoire of literacy practices. This is not an attempt to perpetuate the 'tale of blame' that has gone on for too long; such debates are counter-productive and we have much more productive work to do. We are now into our second generation of students in classrooms in front of teachers for whom the concerns I describe above are a reality. Knowing this to be true, what are we, as teacher educators, going to do about it ?

There are layers of concerns that need to be considered as we prepare to 'do something' about this. An obvious start is to move away from blaming method, a positive move which is well underway in Australia. We must look beyond to the wealth of knowledge we already have about literacy as social practice and the inherent complexities involved in developing classroom practices which embody this knowledge for the benefit of *all* children in just and equitable ways. I believe we know a great deal *theoretically* about how one becomes literate or not and the myriad socio-cultural influences on how one develops a comprehensive literate repertoire to serve one's needs or not. We know the dynamics of how cultural capital may give or restrict access to particular 'texts of power' and all that goes with these socio-political events that privilege some and marginalise others.

We need now to decide to make use of this knowledge and determine where we go from here, especially so for those of us involved as teacher educators. A useful start is to move beyond the erroneous assumptions we have made about the repertoire of literacy practices inherent in a Senior English pass as a 'right of passage' and all the assumptions that this implies. This has distracted us for too long and led us to subject content and its assessment which may be inappropriate and ignores who many of the students are sitting in our lectures. It would appear that, like the classroom practices that focus on method which privileges some and marginalises others, we in the hallowed halls of universities have been doing the same thing, justified by some elite sense that we know better so it is okay.

In the same way that we argue for classroom teachers to rethink how it is they portray literacy in classrooms, so too must we, charged with the responsibility for preparing teachers for 'new times' (Hall, 1996) , consider the literacy demands we make of our students. We must engage with who these students are, the lives they live and the literacy repertoires they bring with them on entry to their studies. Ultimately we must consider what they will need in their repertoires as teaching professionals for this future that holds but one certainty, that is, the extent to which it will vastly differ from anything that has gone before. As school systems begin to work on renewal to meet the future needs of students so must universities, meeting the 'literacy challenge' of teachers for the future.

Old Basics - New Basics

The State of Queensland has made a commitment to accelerate the rate of internal change in State schools to more accurately reflect the changing nature of society. This commitment is reflected in the *Queensland State Education 2010* document, a futures strategy for the next ten years of Queensland State schooling, which states that "...the current model of schooling may more appropriately belong to earlier in the twentieth century"(1999, p.25). It involved a comprehensive State-wide consultation to study the forces of change generally and the ways that schools might meet the needs of young people to live in those changed times.

A major thrust of this futures strategy is imbedded in the *New Basics* project which is "... an integrated framework for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment " involving a considerable rethinking of the role of schools, teachers and students. It includes a 'triad' of elements referred to as the *New Basics*, *Rich Tasks* and *Productive Pedagogies*, each of which reflects the three aspects of the integrated framework referred to above.

As the *New Basics* project developed, 'the team' (see the *New Basics Project Technical Paper, 2000*, for a list of those involved) knew very well the risks inherent in the term '*new basics*' and the public scrutiny being directed at their work; much consultation went on during the 'namings', such is the power of the word! Every effort was made to satisfy all concerned that the 'new' didn't replace the 'old' basics; the 'new basics' were to be "...a way of focusing and coordinating the teaching of *traditional* and *new* fields of knowledge in relation to new demands and contexts" (p.31).

The paper goes on to say that "...the old technologies of pen writing, book reading, spoken communications, mental arithmetic and so on are not made redundant by these changes(p.38). This renewal project sets out four "... clusters, families or groups of practices that are essential for survival in the worlds that students have to deal with" which are the *New Basics* (see Appendix A).

These concepts have considerable merit and appear to effectively acknowledge what this uncertain future might require of young people. The focus on the individual as a member of a broader global community with responsibilities and high levels of communicative need is foregrounded. That being the case, I would argue for a similar rethinking of teacher preparation programs to reflect these ideas in some productive ways so that teachers are less the 'aliens' in the classroom (Wilson,1997).

A simple example of universities being locked into the past comes from a close examination of the 'academic essay' as the ultimate measure of a student's knowledge about a given topic; it certainly reflects a fairly discrete and unique set of literate practices. Does the ability of one to write this essay, with the narrow conventions set out in various style guides, reflect the depth of knowledge and understanding a person might have about that topic ? Is this likely to be true of all people ?

We know, of course, the answer to these questions is 'no' yet we persist in the essay as the dominant means of assessing students' worth. I make this point not to say that

there is no longer a place for the essay but merely to raise questions and use the essay as metaphor to focus our attention on other practices in which we engage that may deserve scrutiny. Further questioning may lead to greater scrutiny.

How does one get to know the essay writing genre anyway ? When does it get taught and how do we get to perfect it such that we can use it to show what we know about any given topic ? Peter Freebody posed the question at our workshop last year – “If we aren’t prepared to teach it should we be assessing it ?” Are we prepared to teach essay writing ? or do we assume students already know how to write a great essay ? Is that Senior English result our guarantee that this assumption is true ? I hope I have planted the seed of doubt that this might not be so – if not, here’s more.

One could extend this scurrilous and irreverent examination and ask how many essays teachers will have to write in their professional lives. Does the ‘perfection’ of essay writing make for better teachers ? Do the students who don’t write great essays and so don’t get to teach as a result mean they wouldn’t have been great teachers ? Does it mean that those who do end up teaching because they can write a good essay are necessarily the best teachers ?

If one was to focus on the literacy demands of the essay one could ask - is the essay writing task merely a literacy test in which some subject content is imbedded ? Is this narrow test of literacy competence the best way, in this very changed world, to ‘screen’ those who are to be credentialed into the teaching profession or not ? Or does this reflect preparation of teachers for “ ... a model of schooling (that) belongs to a past era, when a production economy demanded graduates who could read, write, perform simple calculations and take directions from supervisors” (2010: *Queensland State Education*, p. 26). It could be argued that the essay is merely a focus on elements of the ‘old basics’ at the risk of ignoring the place for ‘new basics’ as well. Again, I remind the reader that the essay is used here merely as metaphor for all our work in teacher education. If we look at other aspects of our work does it reveal similar sorts of questions ? Let’s hope so !

Professional Trends

Education Queensland

The New Basics project is described as “... a project in school renewal and improvement with a focus on pedagogy. “(Education Queensland, 2000). It is this focus on pedagogy which demands attention from the universities involved in teacher preparation. My expressions of concern about the literacy repertoires of students and response or lack thereof within universities is reflected in this idea of renewal and improvement; the focus on pedagogy must not be just what we teach our students about their future teaching but about reflection on our own pedagogy in that process.

The momentum the New Basics project has generated and its presence in many State schools on a trial basis in Queensland, shows considerable innovation. The international attention that is being given to the New Basics suggests that Queensland is really onto something worthwhile. Reflecting on practice in university preparation of teachers in similar ways , particular for those going into the Queensland State system, needs to be considered. Modeling innovative practice consistent with other initiatives of a ‘futures’ nature going on elsewhere in the world and making it part of

the pedagogy within teacher preparation programs, legitimates the theorising around change that is studied in various subjects (Wilson and Klein, 2000).

BTR

Further to the Education Queensland initiatives are those of the Board of Teacher Registration (BTR), the body charged with authorising teacher preparation programs and registering teachers to work in the State of Queensland. They share this concern about the literacy repertoire of teachers entering the profession. In May of 2001 the BTR published a policy document titled *Literacy in Teacher Education: Standards for Preservice Programs* which resulted from a major review and consultation process over the previous two years involving various interest groups across the State (this can be downloaded at <http://www.btr.qld.edu.au/litrep.htm>).

The report begins with a range of definitions for language and literacy and the eventual use of the term ‘literacies’ along with the acknowledgment of ‘new literacies’ deriving from media, technologies and other social changes. The review also described areas in which literacy is an issue for teachers including the essential knowledges about literacy teachers need, the teacher’s knowledge of literacy pedagogy and the literacy competencies demanded of teachers.

The report concludes with a number of recommendations and mandates for literacy in preservice programs and standards for graduating teachers. This very recent document has only just gone into circulation and several areas are somewhat ‘grey’ at the moment. However, it is very clear that the issues I raise early in this paper about the literacy competencies of some students will become a major concern; that is, the BTR standards describe quite discretely the need for graduates to have specific meta-linguistic and language skills which are clearly lacking in the students who are identified above.

The role of the university in this process is quite significant, not only in terms of providing delivery of the content but the assessment of performance, since we are being asked to *certify* that the candidate has these competencies on graduation. It is recommended that a range of assessment be carried out to ‘map’ this literate progression through the degree program and portfolios are recommended as a means of providing evidence for the certification process. It is interesting to note that these listed competencies also include the information and communication technologies of the students as well as what is described as ‘literacy’.

These are a couple of recent State initiatives in Queensland; each State has its own version of attempts at similar things. At the national level, initiatives such as the STELLA project (Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia), the National Competency Framework for Beginning Teaching (1996), Teachers for the 21st Century (2001) represent work motivated by similar thinking.

Implications for Universities

Each of the points I have made above are somewhat in isolation but of course they intertwine in complex and profound ways. The diverse literacy competencies of

students entering university with a Senior English pass is fundamental with intricate consequences. This one factor alone is profound, a history of academic success at the school level for all comers but which often leaves students wanting at the tertiary level because of their literacy abilities. The fact that **85.8 %** (Board of Senior Secondary School Studies statistics) of all students enrolled in Queensland Senior English in 2000 achieved a Sound or better is an issue that needs further investigation and wide debate among relevant groups.

Universities might react to this problem in a variety of ways including staying with the status quo which is totally unresponsive and irresponsible. A response currently in use in many universities and which is seen to be a positive reaction is to 'up-skill' students identified with a 'deficient' repertoire of literacy practices. This might include extra academic support from a variety of sectors within the university, additional subjects to offer compensatory literacy instruction, support within specific subjects such as 'drafts' of writing prior to final submission and so on. The resource implications are heavy, including the additional demands on already over-worked academic staff.

These strategies are reactive and not as effective as one might wish to believe; much has been written about the failure of such 'remedial' programs to have any long-term impact on the 'transferability' of skills to new contexts. More long-term strategies must be considered.

It is urgent to break the cycle of graduating teachers who don't have the personal repertoire of these 'basics' of the language which they will have to teach while, at the same time, including the pedagogy that includes 'futures thinking' and curricula. It seems that we are in a cycle where we now have some teachers wanting in some of these basics, such as useable metalinguistic skills, and so are unable to support children and prepare them to move with these 'new times'.

Others argue that an alternative would be to raise the entry requirements in Senior English to a level that would exclude any students who clearly don't have the English literacy competencies required of existing academic requirements. This, of course, simply worsens things by ensuring that many equity groups are represented even more poorly than they are now in the teaching profession and the privileged continue in this 'cycle of exclusion'.

Maintaining current entrance requirements and keeping university programs as they are as well leaves another choice, make the tasks easier so as to accommodate those with a limited repertoire which has its own self-evident problems. Further 'dumbing down' of the curriculum simply enters the teaching-learning cycle and schools serve students ever less well than they do currently. Such rhetorical nonsense may appear redundant to most but should indicate, for any who doubt, the need for something new and futures-oriented in university teaching; the time has come.

Productive Pedagogies

The acknowledgment of multiple literacies and the evidence before us of the changing nature of life in 'new times', not to mention the continued social exclusion of so many groups from school success and the teaching profession, demands that

addressing the issue be considered. Using the New Basics framework within the context of the university preparation of teachers seems to have considerable merit .

The three elements represent the three aspects of teaching, that is curriculum, pedagogy and assessment – New Basics, Productive Pedagogies and Rich Tasks. Interpreting how these look in university programs is not too difficult and, at the same time, enables academic staff to model the pedagogy, curriculum and assessment regimes that are moving into the system in which the candidates will work one day.

Much of the work on the ‘pedagogy’ in the New Basics model has come from the QSRLS (Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study, 1998), a study commissioned by Education Queensland as part of the 2010 strategy, to scrutinise existing pedagogy in State schools. It represented a shift of focus from student outcomes to pedagogy and its influence on these outcomes with the intent of making pedagogy more responsive to and serve better the needs of students in New Times.

So many of the twenty elements from the productive pedagogy items (see Appendix ‘B’) cross over and can legitimately inform university teaching; good pedagogy need not be isolated to the school classroom, after all! Rather than the measure of good university teaching being student retention, a particularly dominant force in these times of economic rationalism, a focus on relevance, intellectual quality, supportive learning environment and recognition of difference could be foregrounded.

Concluding remarks

As in the school contexts, “...teacher quality variables appear to be more strongly related to achievement” than other factors (Darling-Hammond,1999). It is ironic how much content in preservice teacher education programs is about ‘good’ teaching and what this might look like for now and into the future. Yet a dogged adherence to rather conservative practices persists; perhaps we need to review and question more, as I have done to the poor essay above.

This is not just about ‘critically reflective practice’ as the term is too commonly used. Many academics would claim ‘critically reflective practitioner’ status and teach such practice as subject content to be studied; by 3rd year my students simply talk about it as the ‘R’ word. Far too often such concepts enter the vernacular, as has often occurred with concepts such as ‘whole language’ and ‘mushfake’ (Gee, 1990) occurs. This term refers to occasions where mere talk about, and tinkering at the edges with little depth of real action, is seen to be an enactment of the concept itself, a bit of a pretext for the real thing . Some of the most critically reflective practitioners I know haven’t even changed their lecture notes in far too long !!

Let us ‘practise what we preach’, use what we know from our research and theoretical understandings and re-work the pedagogy in productive ways. University preparation of teachers is too vital an aspect of any nations education system to tinker at the edges. The thinking of each teacher about their role and what counts will shape the experiences of thousands of individuals over the course of time. Despite too many governments’ unwillingness to acknowledge this, we as teacher educators are in this

important role and our own pedagogy should model what it is we want our students to become when they assume the role of teacher.

APPENDIX 'A'

(<http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics/html/nbmenu.html>)

Life pathways and social futures

Who am I and where am I going?

- Living in and preparing for diverse family relationships
- Collaborating with peers and others
- Maintaining health and care of self
- Learning about and preparing for new worlds of work
- Developing initiative and enterprise

Multiliteracies and communications media

How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?

- Blending traditional and new communications media
- Making creative judgments and engaging in performance
- Communicating using languages and intercultural understandings
- Mastering literacy and numeracy

Active citizenship

What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?

- Interacting within local and global communities
- Operating within shifting cultural identities
- Understanding local and global economic forces
- Understanding the historical foundation of social movements and civic institutions

Environments and technologies

How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?

- Developing a scientific understanding of the world
- Working with design and engineering technologies
- Building and sustaining environments

APPENDIX 'B'

Table 1: Categories* of Productive Pedagogy

Intellectual Quality	Relevance	Supportive Classroom Environment	Recognition of Difference
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	<p>Higher-order thinking</p> <p>Deep knowledge Deep understanding Substantive conversation Knowledge problematic Metalanguage</p>	<p>Knowledge integration Background knowledge Connectedness Problem-based curriculum</p>	<p>Student control Social support Engagement Explicit criteria Self-regulation</p>	<p>Cultural knowledges Inclusivity Narrative Group identity Citizenship</p>
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Source: *New Basics Project Technical Paper*, Education Queensland, 2000. P. 50

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