Explicit teaching as an ‘enabling’ literacy practice

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Christine Edwards-Groves: In the day-to-day realities of classroom life, teachers are faced with the challenge of designing and implementing high quality literacy instruction under conditions of increasing scrutiny. What we teach, how we teach and how well we teach are perennial issues, especially in regard to the efficacy of literacy practices in classrooms. And whilst teachers have always understood the critical significance of good teaching to their students’ learning, the practical challenge for teachers is what this looks like, sounds like and feels like in actual classroom lessons. How learners are ‘enabled’ into the literate world is an important and enduring concern.

In what follows, I paint a picture that portrays effective literacy teaching as practice which ‘enables’ learners. Enabling practices allow learners ‘to go on’: to go on as literacy learners who participate in particular distributed and orchestrated arrangements in classroom lessons, for example, in reading lessons or writing lessons. Enabling literacy education practices help learners to go on in literacy practices – to be knowing and skilful, who know what they are doing, why they are doing it and how to go about literacy. Of course, knowing that ultimately allows them to go on as developing and literate members of our society. These are our aims as teachers and I take the view that explicit teaching is one of the enabling practices that affords learners an opportunity ‘to go on’ in their education.

Today, I will say a little bit about what explicit teaching is and how it enables learners. My comments here will give exposure to the practice of explicit teaching, which has, for at least two decades, gained significant attention in policy statements, learning and teaching frameworks and quality teaching guidelines.

To start with, three main points taken up throughout this discussion:

1. Literacy learning is a social exercise in which learners are initiated into school literacy practices through participation in lessons enacted in the social space of the classroom.
2. Literacy lessons are events orchestrated in three interconnected dimensions: they involve learners using particular kinds of language; they involve them in particular kinds of literacy activities; and they involve them in particular kinds of relationships with other people. My research group describe these three dimensions as ‘saying’, ‘doing’ and ‘relating’.
3. Explicit teaching is not the same as direct, prescriptive instruction. It is explicit in the sense that students are extremely clear about how they can participate in the classroom. Being clear about the sayings, the doings and relatings enables a meeting of minds between the teachers and their students in the moment-by-moment life of the classroom.

Teacher: There’s a variety of ways that we set up literacy in our classroom. We have our text type lesson, which involves explicit teaching of listening, talking and writing. And that’s a very good model—it’s based on the language features of text type. The reason that we do that is the majority of the students in my class—23 of 27—are ESL learners. So that’s a really good way of supporting them and extending the students who are English-speaking students as well.
We also have group-work activities, where students will work collaboratively with students at their level and they'll be engaged in spelling activities, where it's open-ended tasks incorporating the spelling words of the week.

They’ll have Writing Centre, where they’ll have a choice to be able to engage in different writing activities. That, again, is open-ended, but within reason, so that we’re extending the top students as well as supporting those students who need a scaffold.

They’re also incorporating comprehension, so we do reciprocal reading, where students are given a variety of texts. They work through the different roles of the reader, so they take their turns clarifying and predicting and they go through those steps and then they’re asked to respond in a way that they feel is comfortable to them.

So we might provide them—for those students who need the support—we might provide a graphic organiser and then, once they’ve worked through the graphic organiser in a group, they’ll then take that and they’ll produce a piece of writing.

So they’ve gone through the steps of reading and talking about it, practising the language with other people and then being able to feel confident in producing work on their own. So they’re the different ways that we incorporate literacy in, well, in my classroom.

Teacher: The way I set up my literacy block in the classroom so that the lessons are explicit and address student needs, I go from a whole-class perspective, to a small group, to the individual child. For example, I start with shared reading, so, my shared reading is always integrated with other KLAs. So I use the big book for the shared reading and, through that, I’m actually teaching students particular aspects of the language that I’d like them to use.

From that, then I set up my guided reading groups and, as part of the guided reading lesson, I set up literacy rotations and those rotations come from literacy experiences within their writing, aspects of the shared reading, the spelling that’s happening in the classroom—a number of activities whereby I explicitly teach particular groups reading at that particular level.

From the shared reading, then we go into individual reading and during that time the students are reading easier books at their own level. So, they have a collection of books that they enjoy reading. So actually during that time it’s actually a silent reading session, where the child is independently reading. My role in that is that I will actually listen to small groups of children individually just to see, you know, where they’re at with their reading. And that gives me a lot of information then to use in the guided reading lessons.

Christine Edwards-Groves: Let’s turn firstly to the classroom as a starting point. All classrooms share one thing in common: they are unique social sites. Classrooms provide an interconnected linguistic, physical and social space for student learning—the dimensions of saying, doing and relating. When learners enter this space, they are initiated into particular kinds of literacy practices. They enter the linguistic space in which language is used in particular ways and for particular purposes. At the same time, they enter a physical space in which they engage in particular kinds of activities. And they also enter a social space in which they relate to other people in particular ways. So whether they are reading a ‘big’ book, writing a classroom wiki, researching a group project, reciting a poem, participating in show-and-tell or a classroom spelling game, students learn at a very young age how to participate in the language, the activities and the relationships of school learning.

Now I turn to thinking about the practices of literacy learning and teaching in classroom lessons. Literacy lessons unfold in action in the classroom as particular types of living practices (or moment-by-moment social interactions). This social action is manifested through particular and generally
recognisable practice arrangements (or sayings, doings and relatings). These sayings, doings and relatings are always overlapping and intertwined in the ways literacy lessons unfold. In these three dimensions, the social interactions of the classroom give shape and sense not only to the students' literacy practices but also to their literacy learning practices. Furthermore, they are understood by the learner as a literacy lesson within the particular circumstances in which they occur.

The dimensions of language, activity and relationships get laid down over time through the interactions of the classroom. It is this talk that binds the learning together. By being developed over time, students learn how to participate, or to go on in the literacy practices of the classroom. For example, when students participate in classroom discussions about text, both teacher and students can rely on particular prefigured rules about answering questions and turn-taking, such as ‘hands up’ or waiting for the teacher to nominate their turn. Similarly, when students participate in guided reading, prefigured routines or ways of working ensure that all members of the group have a chance to practise and improve their reading.

What counts for students as learning, and literacy learning in particular, may be different depending on prior literacy experiences within and beyond the classroom life and the nature of the relationships experienced within and beyond the classroom. In fact, research has shown that success in literacy is often linked to how learners participate and behave in relationship to the teachers’ rules and expectations, rather than what specific aspects of literacy are learnt. Students need to know the kind and the content of the talk expected, the kinds of activities involved, and the kinds of relationships with the teacher and each other that are expected. Making these things clear is what explicit teaching means, so that students enter their learning with clarity.

Thinking in terms of the interactive nature of literacy practice gives us a different way to look at classrooms and literacy learning. From this perspective, a lesson is not simply an activity or a task, nor is it the texts or the resources used; it is not the teaching program or the syllabus or its prescribed outcomes, nor is it the routines or the arrangements of groups, nor even the products of the activities. Of course, each of these elements may give shape to and impact on what is talked about in a ‘lesson’. But all of these things are only vehicles that are utilised in the interactions around literacy—the practices of literacy, and the instructional practices designed to foster participation.

As young learners come to the classroom, they learn what counts as important to be learnt in lessons by how the lesson unfolds in action and through interactions; that is, they live the lesson through different patterns of sayings, doings and relatings. They hear what is given priority through the talk of the teacher, they experience what is given priority through the activities and routines implemented by the teacher, and they understand their place in the classroom and in the world through interpersonal relationships. How different kinds of sayings, doings and relatings come together to enable students and learning is crucial for understanding the effectiveness of literacy learning. And teachers should constantly reflect on and challenge their own interactive literacy teaching practices by asking themselves these key questions:

1. In the first instance, teachers should ask: What do I want my students to learn? Do they know that? Some teachers describe this as ‘letting them in on the big secret’ and realise that what is to be the focus of the lesson activity is to be put directly on the learning table as students ‘tune in’ to their learning and ‘their minds are on task’. This is the main priority of the talk in that lesson. For example, teachers might say ‘As we are practising our reading today, we are focusing on thinking about the message’ or ‘Okay, back on track, what is our task?’

2. As a second challenge, teachers should consider: What do my students hear and understand to be going on? What lessons do my students actually learn? Some teachers realise that much time is taken up attending to managing behaviour, resources or routines; so the lesson talk becomes about doing the right thing or behaving in particular ways rather than ‘on task’ talk and activity concerning specific aspects of literacy.
3. The third question to be considered is: What interactive opportunities do I provide for students to work independently and collectively with others to reflect on and articulate the specific aspects of literacy encountered in a particular lesson or unit of work? Some teachers acknowledge that building in times for students to preview learning and reflect on, respond to and review lessons is often overlooked in the ‘busyness’ of day-to-day classroom life. As a teacher creates time for reflection at the end of the session, they might say: ‘With your learning buddy, share three main messages you learnt from the book you read and between you come up with one key point.’

**Teacher:** Reflection is a very powerful tool because it links students’ learning to their real-life experiences. Those real ‘a-ha’ moments, those ‘light bulb’ moments come during the reflection time, where they’ve spent a lot of time listening to the language being modelled and they spend time practising the language and practising the different skills, but it’s not until you allow them time to think about what they’ve done and to really think about the way that what they’re doing has a connection to their life that they really have that ‘Okay, now I that I know that I understand this skill and I can use it, I can see that there’s a point of understanding it.’

So it’s not that school and lessons are a stand-alone thing that you go and you do; they really are a thing that you go and experience and it’s something that you can take into real life. And we had a lot of that, especially during World Cup time. That’s when the students thought, ‘Oh, I can actually go and I’m reading this and I’m taking in this information and I can apply it to the different types of learning experiences that I’m doing in the classroom’ and that’s when the real passion and the real learning happens. Otherwise you end up getting those real stagnant stock-standard answers. But when they make those connections through reflection, that’s when you really know that they’ve learnt something and they’ll take that away with them.

**Teacher:** The reflection’s very important, for children to be reflecting on their learning. And I like to do that sometimes at the end of the lesson; sometimes throughout the lesson. And I feel that if children are able to reflect on what they have done, they’re also able to reflect on what they have learnt. Through their reflection they’re also able to tell me things that they found that were sort of tricky for them and so that the reflection provides for me information, for example, where to from here, you know, where to take the child next. So I find the reflection, for me, is a form of assessment, that oral interaction with the child. The children I am teaching are Year 2 children but I also do encourage a written reflection and I do learn a lot about their learning and the way that they like to learn and I think that reflection is a very powerful assessment tool.

**Christine Edwards-Groves:** Recognised here is that developing skills to look critically at and challenge the details of the interactions and relationships experienced in their own literacy lessons, teachers can form a reflexive self-understanding of their role in creating enabling interactive practices. Such self-reflection and critique leads to developing understandings about what is set up to be of primary importance in literacy lessons by displaying what is made explicit and what is left implicit. Teachers can learn what topics are the main point of their talk, how their ‘lessons’ progress and remain focused on literacy learning, what their students ‘hear’ to be the main message of the lesson and how their ‘lessons’ conclude. For example, effective teachers prepare the learning path by explicating instructional goals, purposes and expected outcomes by paying careful attention to what is talked about in lessons. It is in these relationships and interactions that effective and enabling literacy teaching is practised, developed and made visible.

**Teacher:** Okay, boys and girls, what we’re going to do now is we’re going to practise the language that you have written down. And the way that we’re going to practise that is that, in your groups, you’re each going to get one of these. On each side of the die you have the same picture that you’ve been using, the same pictures you have here, and some of the technical language that we’ve been using. You’re going to take turns and you’re going to roll the die. Whatever it lands on, so, the top one at the top, whatever it lands on it’s up to you to come up with a sentence. And then you take
turns and you practise. There’s six sides so you get six different sentences and you might want to have a few goes.

**Christine Edwards-Groves:** My final point is one that is a little more provocative, in that explicit teaching is not simply direct, prescriptive instruction. For example, in some jurisdictions, teachers have taken to scripted literacy programs as a response to the pressures to be more explicit. In my view, the high level of prescription (which some of these programs demonstrate) actually limits the scope for action and interaction between teachers and students in classrooms and clearly has the potential to constrain and influence the types of ‘relatings’ experienced in the moment-by-moment unfolding of classrooms lessons. Scripted lessons do not just restrict the agency of teachers: they change the moral face of education by denying teachers opportunities to act with professional creativity, freedom and integrity. There is a fine balance here and so we need to exercise caution and think carefully about the scope of action and interaction afforded learners as they encounter literacy in classrooms.

To conclude, what is needed is a renewed emphasis on the relational or interactive dimension of classroom literacy practice. A focus on how social interactions (as the fabric of educational practice) shape and are shaped by the sayings, doings and relatings in classroom learning events is necessary to shift our understandings of what constitutes effective literacy practice. Such scrutiny will allow us to understand explicit teaching as an enabling and equitable classroom literacy experience.