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Pilgrims in a foreign land: Teachers using graphic novels as classroom texts

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Teacher Librarian: 'Okay boys, it's time to get yourselves a book and settle in for the rest of the lesson.'

The boys wander off to the shelves and a number of them return with our ever-so-popular graphic novels. Shoes are kicked off as they plonk themselves into a comfy chair to enjoy some time with their self-selected reading. It's then that the boys' English teacher, who until now has paid little heed to the lesson's proceedings, looks up from her laptop, notices one of the boys is reading a graphic novel, frowns, stiffens, lifts herself from her chair, and approaches him.

Teacher: 'For goodness sake, put that graphic novel back and get yourself a REAL book to read!'

I was that teacher librarian. I subsequently met the boy's gaze and we silently agreed that it was not the time or place to challenge the teacher's directive. Instead, I took the next 30 minutes or so of quiet reading time to reflect on her response. She had sat through two presentations on graphic novels that I had delivered to her faculty and I just couldn't understand her continued perception that graphic novels, in her words, were 'not the stuff of English classrooms.'

Bearing in mind Carter's (2007) call for more success stories from teachers using graphic novels in the classroom, I decided that promoting the experience of those who 'do' graphic novels might be an effective strategy to encourage those who 'don't.' To explore and illuminate such experiences, the driving question for my research was: What is the lived experience of teaching with graphic novels?

Background to the study

The need for individuals to be interpreters, managers, and producers of myriad multimodal texts is woven through the fabric of contemporary life in Australia (Freebody, 2013). Furthermore, over the last decade or so, increasing attention has been paid to the capacity of graphic novels to

facilitate students' development of the multiliteracies considered necessary to enable the efficient and effective navigation of an increasingly visual textual landscape. To this end, a robust body of research highlights the educational benefits of using graphic novels in the classroom. Such benefits include: the facilitation of traditional alphabetic literacy in poor or struggling readers (McVicker, 2007; Schwertner, 2008); an alternate avenue for the study of traditional texts (Carter, 2007; Laycock, 2007); a means to enhance second language acquisition in students (Cary, 2004; Chun, 2009; Liu, 2004); the delivery of disciplinary content (Boerman-Connell, 2015; Schraffenberger, 2007; Tatalovic, 2009); facilitation of multimodal literacy, particularly visual literacy (Connors, 2010; Hammond, 2009; Peterson, 2010), and the promotion of critical and cultural literacies (Beach & O'Brien, 2008; Beavis, 2000; Hecke, 2011).

Freebody (2013) notes that the role of teachers to facilitate re-visioned literacy practices in young people is sufficiently pivotal that it might well be 'the most far-reaching of schooling's roles' (p. 9). Given the potential of graphic novels as complex and sophisticated multimodal texts to facilitate such practices, teachers' uptake of graphic novels as texts, might be assumed a 'fait accompli'. The relatively small suite of research into teachers' experience with graphic novels as texts, however, suggests the opposite, instead indicating that teaching with the format is a controversial and potentially 'risky' practice (Callahan & Low, 2004; Clark, 2013; Hansen, 2012; Rhoades, Dallacqua, Kersten, Merry & Miller, 2015).

The research highlights a number of challenges faced by teachers in their implementation of graphic novels into the classroom and this may well account for the disjuncture between 'comics-friendly' teachers and 'comics-using' teachers. At the forefront of these challenges is the disconnect between the multimodal and multimediated notion of literacy prevailing outside school and that supported by the 'deep grammar of schooling' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), whereby 'school literacy' continues to privilege the traditional monomodal discourse and an associated set of skills that focus on the reading and writing of prose texts. This disconnect creates pedagogical tension for teachers who, on one hand desire to address the needs of their students, but on the other must deal with crowded and prescriptive curricula that continue to privilege traditional notions of literacy and which extol the virtues of standardised testing and assessment of such (Cormack & Comber, 2013).

A handful of studies focused on classroom pedagogy with graphic novels suggests that teachers' hesitancy to employ them as texts is tied to teachers' lack of familiarity with the format, especially the metalanguage of graphic novels, and also to inadequate provision of professional support for their use (Annett, 2008; Block, 2013; Callahan, 2009; Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher & Frey, 2012). Such support is not only lacking for in-service teachers, but also lies in the failure of pre-service teacher training to acknowledge graphic novels as legitimate texts (Clark, 2013).

Given the bulk of graphic novel research emanates from the United States, and in light of Macken-Horarick's (2009) broad observation that English teachers in New South Wales have found themselves ill-equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to sail through 'the swirling mist of uncertainties poorly chartered territory, and choppy seas' (p.33) of multiliteracies, I felt it was appropriate to explore teachers' experiences with graphic novels in the local context.

The research approach

A desire to illuminate and understand teachers' practice with graphic novels led me to employ a hermeneutic phenomenological research methodology in my doctoral research. At its most basic, phenomenology is the study of phenomena as they are lived in their natural or prereflective state. It is an approach that 'examines taken-for-granted human situations as they are experienced in

everyday life but which go typically unquestioned' (Finlay, 2016, p. 173). The addition of a hermeneutic lens acknowledges that all human experience occurs in context and is communicated through language and social relationships. Lived experiences, therefore, require interpretation to be uncovered and understood.

From amongst the many and varied schools of phenomenology, I adopted Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach, otherwise known as 'pedagogical phenomenology or phenomenology of practice', which can be described as 'explicitly and emphatically hermeneutic, and also as having a focus which is primarily educational' (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 4). The emphasis on first-person reporting in van Manen's approach held particular appeal in terms of closing the gap between researcher and reader, as did the addition of an artistic dimension to the interpretation and presentation of the study's findings vis-a-vis the inclusion of non-topic related literature and poetry and literary devices, such as anecdote and metaphor (van Manen, 2016). To this end, my account of teachers' experiences with graphic novels in the classroom was created within the metaphorical framework of teachers as pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago, a network of pilgrimage routes across Europe leading to the shrine of the apostle St James in the Cathedral of de Compostela in north-western Spain (Laycock, 2017).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is often employed by researchers who have 'strong roots in their own discipline' (Henriksson & Friesen, 2012, p. 3) as it facilitates the researcher's input into the co-creation of the description of a lived experience. Despite the possibility that the researcher's active participation in the research might blur 'a fresh and objective view of the data' (Costley, Elliott & Gibbs, 2013, p. 7), impartiality in hermeneutic phenomenological research is neither desired nor considered achievable. To accommodate for any 'blurring', a hermeneutic phenomenological approach places an emphasis on ensuring transparency of the research by way of clear signposting from the researcher as to the way in which the researcher's knowledge and understanding has been woven through the research process.

Research context and participants

The study focused on the experiences of nine secondary English teachers from both independent and government schools in a large metropolitan area in New South Wales. In order to ensure the richness of data and to optimise proximal closeness between the participants' graphic novel experience and their description of it, participants were purposively chosen on the basis of their imminent teaching of a unit of work in Stage 4 (Years 7 & 8) or Stage 5 (Years 9 & 10) using graphic novels as primary texts. The selected participants then taught their unit of work across the spectrum of single-sex classes of boys and girls, co-educational classes, mixed ability classes, and streamed classes of high-ability students.

Primary data were collected via two loosely structured hermeneutic conversations with each participant. The first conversation explored the participants' knowledge of, attitudes to, and previous experience with, graphic novels. The second conversation took place after the participants' experiences of teaching with graphic novels and considered the challenges, celebrations, and surprises encountered by participants. The interview data were complemented by my field notes, the participants' teaching programs for the graphic novel unit of work and, in some cases, the participants' written reflections on the unit.

Interpretation of the research data was achieved in the first instance through idiographic analysis, whereby individual participants' descriptions of their experiences with graphic novels were reflected on, interpreted, and made explicit through the crafting of participant stories. Second, data were considered holistically to identify thematic connections in the lived experience of

teaching with graphic novels. These themes provided the framework for the organisation of my analysis, interpretation, and reporting of findings. The metaphor of teachers as pilgrims was employed to assist the interpretation and organisation of these themes around the notions of the pre-pilgrimage and pilgrimage stages of the teaching-with-graphic-novels experience.

The research findings

The pre-pilgrimage experience of teaching with graphic novels

Ewing and Smith (2001) suggest that altruistic service lies at the heart of teacher practice and it was this deep sense of purpose that emerged as a common reason for the participants' inclusion of graphic novels as classroom texts. Without exception, participants explicitly articulated a belief that teaching with graphic novels had the potential to enhance their students' ability to navigate a textual landscape in which images prevail as the point of reference for reading the world (Kress, 2003). Even those with little knowledge of, or lack of passion for, graphic novels were keen to use the format in their classrooms because they recognised potential benefits for their students. In taking ownership of the responsibility to provide the bridge between texts of the contemporary textual landscape and the multiliteracies required by their students to effectively engage with them, participants were enacting the assignment to teachers of the responsibility to foster a literate citizenry (Avgerinou, 2009; Freebody, 2003).

We would be doing a massive disservice to students if we weren't giving them the toolbox to unpack the texts that they're encountering constantly in their lives. (Kate)

The participants' commitment to facilitate the growth of students as informed and discerning managers of multimodal texts was accompanied by their acknowledgement of a responsibility to frontload students with 'declarative knowledge' of graphic novels through overt instruction in the visual grammar or metalanguage of the format. Such recognition aligns with broader findings by Callahan and Low (2004) that the 'seemingly mundane exercise' (p. 52) of providing students with a vocabulary for exploring popular culture texts provides them with a language with which they can talk about the myriad texts they encounter in their everyday lives.

If they're going to talk about graphic novels, they're going to talk about them properly. (Megan)

In addition to recognising an ethical responsibility to endow students with the knowledge and skills to navigate multimediated and multimodal texts, participants also articulated the need to acknowledge the lifeworld texts of their students in order to engage and motivate them. Essentially, but not withstanding the complex nature of learning, the literature suggests that students will learn effectively when teachers construct learning environments that align with desired learning outcomes *and* engage students (Biggs, 2003; Trowler, 2010). Two participants specifically spoke about using graphic novels to engage boys because they provide a 'hook' or transitive factor— 'the capacity of some element in a lesson ... to arouse and hold student attention in a way that leads to understanding and mastery' (Reichert & Hawley, 2010, p. xxi).

If they're reading them and they're enjoying them, then why aren't we doing something about it? (Megan)

While acknowledging the benefits for their students to be gained through teaching with graphic novels, a number of participants also described personal gains to be made. Some welcomed the opportunity to bring a lifeworld interest into the classroom, while others with previous experience of comics described approaching the graphic novel unit with an elevated sense of confidence. In particular, two Early Career teachers anticipated the integration of something familiar into their

teaching would provide a rare moment of ‘knowing’ amidst an otherwise confusing and demanding pedagogical environment.

You don’t always get the opportunity to teach something that you enjoy. (Mike)

Encouraging students to ‘like’ English and thereby make teaching more enjoyable was another anticipated benefit of graphic novel use. Not unrelated, was the opportunity seen by some participants to use graphic novels as a foundation for building positive relationships with their students. That said, two participants expressed concern about the double-edged sword effect, whereby the close analysis of students’ lifeworld texts had the potential to destroy students’ enjoyment of those texts.

You don’t want to make English boring, but there’s a real danger in bringing in that element of popular culture that they can hook on. If we go too far and hammer it home too much, then they’ll end up hating it. (Thomas)

While participants who declared some pre-existing knowledge of graphic novels approached the unit with confidence, those who lacked lifeworld experience with comics felt hesitant and somewhat vulnerable in the absence of support provided through pre-service training, curriculum documents, or formal professional development activities. Notwithstanding the difficulty of finding time to attend formal professional development events within the constraints of a crowded and assessment driven curriculum, professional development opportunities rarely focused on the knowledge and skills required to support the use of graphic novels as classroom texts. Not to be deterred, however, they individually sought and found some comfort in graphic novel resources shared by colleagues, either at school or via personal learning networks. In several instances, mention was also made by the participants of the school’s teacher librarian as a ‘significant other’ who assisted with resources and information in preparation for the unit of work.

The pilgrimage experience of teaching with graphic novels

While all participants acknowledged the benefit of using graphic novels to facilitate alphabetic literacy and to engage and motivate students, their use of the format in the classroom went well beyond these functions. Without exception, participants chose more complex paths that drew on the multimodal and polysemic nature of graphic novels to encourage the development in students of ‘visual literacy’ through the analysis of graphic novel codes and conventions; ‘critical literacy’ through consideration of the manner in which graphic novels are constructed; and ‘cultural literacy’ through exploration of the context in which graphic novels are located, written, and read. In employing graphic novels to meet these objectives, participants addressed their specific responsibility as English teachers to ‘facilitate students’ exposure to, interaction with, and examination and creation of multiple existing and possible text forms’ (Carter, 2013, p. 9).

I wanted to do something that really challenged the higher-order thinkers in my class, and to look at [the graphic novel] as a genuine literary form. (Kate)

Paramount in working with graphic novels in the classroom was the participants’ aim to validate graphic novels as a literary and narrative form. To do so, they spent considerable time looking at the metalanguage of graphic novels, prompted by the belief that students were implicitly able to make meaning of them, but lacked a semiotic vocabulary through which to articulate their understanding. Further to working with the more technical aspects of graphic novels, participants had students explore and reflect on a range of concepts, which included gender, race, war, and

multiculturalism to encourage them to develop the ability to engage in sophisticated analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of multimodal texts.

We're a visual society ... even the textual form itself is a product of the context. (Mike)

The various paths taken with graphic novels by participants reflected the complexity of the pedagogical decisions that teachers make in their classrooms as they weighed school, syllabus, and departmental requirements against the individual needs of students and against their own experience, knowledge, and skills. As became evident in the descriptions of their experiences, this juggling act presented them with a number of challenges, celebrations and surprises, some of which lay within their control, others beyond it.

Despite varying degrees of confidence as participants prepared to introduce graphic novels into their classrooms, all found the 'reality of the road' rendered them at varying times and to varying degrees, 'strangers in a strange land.' In one way or another, the graphic novel experience for all was new and different to the everyday literary and literacy experiences of their classrooms, and also very different to their personal experiences with the comics medium.

Participants with experience of comics as recreational readers found the rules of engagement changed when graphic novels were used in an educational setting. They remarked that when reading comics for pleasure it didn't matter if you didn't fully 'get it,' but when teaching students in the classroom to make meaning of, and critically analyse, graphic novels, you have to be fluent in the nuances of the format. While the participants' 'first' language—that of traditional prose and visual texts—went some way to assist them in their teaching of graphic novels, it was insufficient to fully foster the development of a graphic novel metalanguage in students. Several participants also noted that the complex and sophisticated texts they were using bore little resemblance in terms of content or artistic style to the comic books of their childhood. Subsequently, some participants felt de-stabilised in the classroom as the 'expert.'

It was harder than I thought. When you teach something, you have to know it ... By the end I thought, 'I just don't have the knowledge'. (Thomas)

Challenges emanating from outside the classroom also posed a major hurdle to participants in their use of graphic novels. Participants were frustrated with an English curriculum, already resembling a crowded Japanese bullet train, at having yet another passenger thrust hastily through its doors and not being given sufficient time to give this new passenger the attention it warranted. Furthermore, the 'foreign' appearance of the new passenger and its incompatibility with the prevailing tests and measures used to evaluate the efficacy of traditional literacy pedagogy only added to participants' frustrations.

Despite institutional, organisational, and contextual challenges, participants successfully stepped around them by employing strategies that included recognising and incorporating students' interest and expertise in graphic novels, a willingness to share their authority in the classroom with students, and by providing a passionate defence and promotion of graphic novels as classroom texts. The rewards of doing so, they noted, made the experience more than worthwhile.

The affective, behavioural, and cognitive engagement of students with graphic novels, beyond enhancing student learning outcomes, reaped benefits for participants. As well as being satisfied that the unit objectives were met, participants expressed being 'happy' and 'thrilled' with the

reception of the unit and considered the use of graphic novels was worth the potential risk that graphic novels might not be well-received by some students.

You can tell in their writing that they really enjoyed it. That's not something you always see.
(Mike)

For Lisa, the wholesale investment of her students in the format came as somewhat of a surprise. She indicated that her students 'were one hundred percent involved' in the unit and took to the graphic novels 'like seagulls to a hot chip.' Other participants also indicated their students enjoyed the graphic novel study and consequently held English in a positive light. David noted, 'The thing that happens with this text, which I do like, is that you'll often get a kid that says that's the first English book they've finished.'

Thomas reported his students being intrinsically motivated to read the graphic novel during the school holidays, while Kate described how one of her brightest students, who was initially hesitant to study the graphic novel because, 'I much prefer words and I want to imagine stuff myself,' finished the unit with the announcement, 'That's amazing, I never thought I'd be interested and engaged on that sort of level with a text.' For Kate, her students' change in attitude to graphic novels was perhaps the highlight of her graphic novel journey. By way of numerous other examples, participants illustrated how their students developed a respect for graphic novels and what they could achieve educationally. Kate noted, for example, that 'they recognised just how sophisticated the form was and how, in a way, it allowed more—to explore a really sensitive topic in a way that just words couldn't do justice to.'

The fact that half of them came away with a new attitude about this form was definitely justification on its own for doing it. (Kate)

While all participants indicated their students were affectively and cognitively engaged in the study of graphic novels, Mike and David described additional benefits for students when their students' lifeworld interests were recognised in the classroom. In doing so, they endorsed the proposition that students who might normally be excluded from discussions of traditional texts may be better equipped to engage with, comprehend, and articulate the content in graphic novels (Christensen, 2006; Rycroft, 2014).

Kiddies who might have remained silent found that they can have a voice because this is a medium that engages them in a whole new way. (David)

David highlighted how graphic novels shifted the source of student voice in his classroom and subsequently changed the classroom dynamics by empowering a particular group of students. Importantly, he noted the implications that the study of graphic novels had for the self-esteem of students for whom graphic novels were preferred reading:

It gives it credibility that their reading pattern all of a sudden has meaning beyond their own little circle of friends. If it appears on the program, it's almost like we've recognised that it has status, that it's worthwhile examining and there's merit there, and its literary merit, and it's worthwhile unpicking.

The participants' descriptions of their experiences suggest that the relationships they were able to forge with students through a common interest in graphic novels was a highlight. By 'affirm[ing] student identities while helping them to explore the world beyond their limited realities' (Nieto, 2013, p. 16), participants developed relationships with their students that provided 'the bedrock

of any learning' (Nieto, p. 6). One participant described students bringing their own graphic novels into the classroom to share with them, while others reported informal conversations with students about graphic novels that occurred outside the classroom. Lisa noted how her relationship with students was enhanced by sharing her large personal collection of graphic novels and manga with her students.

It's nice when it's reciprocal. It means ... that I really have found something that's meaningful to them. (Lisa)

The benefits for participants derived from the use of graphic novels as texts were not confined to those attained through interactions with students. Several participants also noted their own professional growth over the course of the unit vis-a-vis the development of their graphic novel knowledge and skills and their subsequently enhanced confidence to teach graphic novels as texts. Kate noted the ramifications that this held for her future pedagogy in terms of encouraging her to use graphic novels in other areas of the curriculum. On the back of the success of her experience, she intended to expand her graphic novel unit in the future and spend more time 'deconstructing the form, getting [students] to understand the metalanguage [and] also looking at the narrative elements.' She also suggested she would schedule more time for students to design their own graphic novels to demonstrate their understanding.

It's been a good learning curve for me. It was a really good experience and I'm glad I made myself do it. (Kate) If I was to teach this again next year, I would have a wealth of experience. I'd be a bit more confident. (Thomas)

Reflections on teaching with graphic novels

By venturing into the unfamiliar territory of graphic novels as texts and meeting the challenges, teachers in this study exhibited signs of the 'protean mind'; the 'teacherly disposition to explore different forms of semiosis in new ways' (Macken-Horarik, 2009, p. 35). For them, the rewards of this 'teacherly disposition' were manifest in: their professional growth in terms of the knowledge and skills required to teach with graphic novels; the affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement of their students with graphic novels and thus, subject English; the development of multiliteracies in their students; and enhanced teacher-student relationships when students' lifeworld texts were acknowledged in the classroom.

The teachers in this study also emerged as champions of Biesta's (2016) notion of 'the beautiful risk of education', wherein authentic education necessarily involves the risk of loosening one's ties with the regulatory pressures of education to 'help our children and students to engage with, and thus come into, the world' (p. 5). Teachers were willing to be innovative, adventurous, and adaptable in their classroom practice and demonstrated that, in tandem with appropriate support, graphic novels can be successfully taught despite the constraints of a crowded curriculum that continues to privilege alphabetic literacy and the study of prose texts.

In teaching with graphic novels, it was clear that participants were willing to stay true to the 'soft' values they hold as teachers: 'thoughtfulness, hope, and integrity' (Williamson, 2013, p. 198). They were thoughtful regarding the most effective way to address the literacy demands of a changing textual landscape, hopeful that their persistence to embrace a multiliteracies pedagogy would bear fruit, and honest not only by engaging in pedagogy that they perceived as being relevant and appropriate to meet the diverse needs of their students, but in admitting that they too were learners in regard to the nuances of the graphic novel format.

As for the 'risk' in teaching graphic novels, rather than succumbing to the pressure of being destabilised as the 'expert,' participants instead welcomed the opportunity to engage with texts and students in new and different ways that provided a bridge between the world of school and the students' lifeworlds, and that played with the dynamics of the classroom. Thus, at various times in the graphic novel classroom, the listener became the speaker, the speaker became the listener, the teacher became the learner, the student became the teacher, and, together, the teacher and students became explorers.

Implications for practice

Beyond the benefits for those directly involved, this research offers a rich description of teaching with graphic novels that potentially allows other teachers to live the experience vicariously and encourages them to reflect on their own practice with graphic novels as classroom texts. Moreover, the research provides teachers with a defensible justification for teaching with graphic novels and establishes a foundation for further discussions of pedagogy that meets students' needs. It is anticipated, therefore, that teachers engaging with this research will be encouraged to foster new ways of seeing, doing, talking, knowing and thinking about their practice with graphic novels.

The ***English K-10 Syllabus*** in New South Wales provides ground-breaking recognition of changes to the textual landscape and associated notions of literacy. It is the first syllabus document in NSW to explicitly acknowledge graphic novels as potential texts to facilitate the development of students' multiliteracies. Hence, this study's exploration of teachers' experiences with the format is considered timely in order to support both teachers currently using graphic novels as texts and those who will be guided by the regulative framework of the curriculum to include graphic novels in their practice. The study also furthers efforts to 'learn the problems and weaknesses as well as the positive outcomes in using graphic novels' (Schwarz, 2013, p. 152), such that stakeholders in teaching and learning can proceed thoughtfully. Importantly, the research suggests the potential role that a school's teacher librarian might play as a 'significant other' by supporting teachers through the provision of resources and through the sharing of knowledge and skills relating to graphic novels.

Finally, the study's exploration and illumination of the experience of teachers using graphic novels adds to the growing body of research and literature into the educational value of, and teachers' experiences with, graphic novels as texts. In particular, the findings help close the gap between what-could-be and what-is happening with graphic novels in classrooms.

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Investigative learning – our journey at Balmain Public School

Sophie Parsons & Ariana Davis



Investigative learning – our journey at Balmain Public School

Ariana Davis, Assistant Principal and Sophie Parsons, teacher at Balmain Public School

Every teacher knows that student engagement is inextricably linked to student learning, and that engagement is most powerful when linked to student interests. With the department's **Future focused learning and teaching** initiative in mind, staff at Balmain Public School have been working to embed individualised, interest-based learning at the core of our programs.

Our journey towards inquiry-based learning began in 2015 when Principal Maria Lambos, a passionate advocate of the process, initiated a study tour on the **Walker Learning** approach. Inspired by this tour, Kindergarten coordinator Ariana Davis developed an investigative learning program for Early Stage 1 that aligns with NSW outcomes. With the continued support of our principal and P&C, this program has since been modified and expanded into Stage 1. We have been proud to share it with our community of schools through teacher professional learning and classroom visits over the last few years.

What does investigative learning look like?

Investigative learning starts with the students. Teachers build a profile of each student's strengths, background and readiness. The traditional classroom set up of a desk for each student is replaced with 'stations' – construction, sensory play, STEM, writing, numeracy or any topic that aligns with our current program. Stations display 'provocations' – activities or materials that invite students to engage in a learning activity. (Some provocation ideas can be viewed on our **Instagram page.**) Each day begins with an hour where students have free reign over which stations to explore.



A learning station, inviting Kindergarten students to investigate patterns

A flexible learning environment is crucial to our program, as our resources and class layout change constantly in accordance with student interests. Visiting teachers are often amazed that our areas remain set up throughout the day and that the children complete standard classwork surrounded by fish, shells, LEGO and paint – without touching it constantly! We have found the structure of our learning routine encourages students to be extremely responsible in the care of this special environment. Secure in the knowledge they will be continuing to explore the following day, they are happy to reset their stations and move on with other activities when asked.



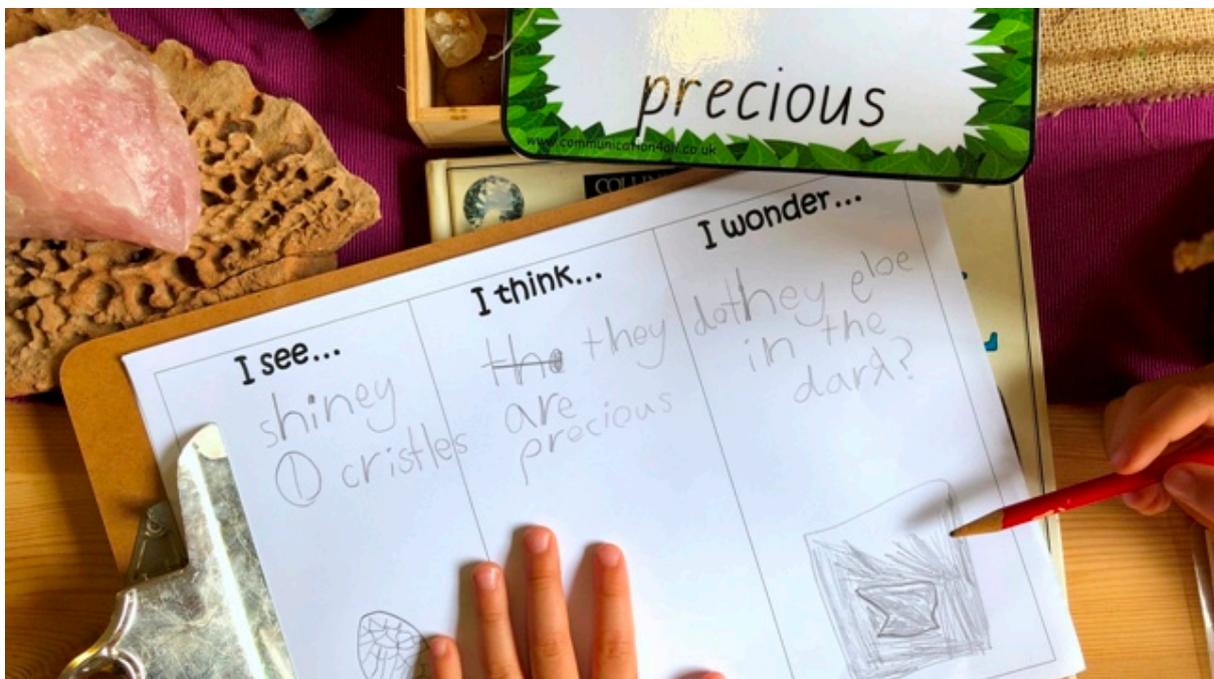
A learning station for artistic investigation

To see our students in action, view our short video, [Investigating together: 'I learn, we learn', Balmain Public](#) (1 min 29 secs) from [Filmpond](#).

How do we know students are covering all the outcomes?

Our explicit teaching time happens in the middle session, and during the morning investigation session teachers are guiding the students to reflect on and consolidate explicit teaching from the day before. An hour in the morning seems like a lot of teaching time, and some people have wondered how we find that time with the extensive NSW curriculum requirements. But play-based curriculum delivery doesn't change the **what** of a curriculum. It is about **how** that curriculum is taught and learned. While investigative learning time offers many choices for students, there is also a clear structure that teachers follow.

Every child is timetabled as a 'focus student' on a fortnightly roster to ensure they receive equal teacher support. Focus students begin the session by describing what they want to achieve or explore. During this time, teachers scaffold the child's plans and understanding in front of the class, gently referring to literacy and numeracy teaching from the day before. For example, if the child wants to write a letter to the tooth fairy, and the grammar focus of the week is question marks, the teacher might suggest that the child can write 'How many teeth do you need for your castle?' in the letter. While the rest of the class is investigating, the teacher works closely with the focus children, supporting them to progress with their individual goals, such as spelling or fine motor development, and to use the explicit teaching in the investigative environment. Using numeracy and literacy skills in an authentic context with an audience makes learning real and meaningful for students every day. At the end of the session, focus students present their findings and creations to the class. For instance, the teacher can point out successful use of punctuation in the student's letter to the tooth fairy, and all students are again guided back to the explicitly taught outcomes. Other children are inspired by the mastery of literacy and numeracy skills in their peers, and individual, goal-oriented progress is celebrated every day as a class.



A student records their investigation of sedimentary, igneous and metamorphic rocks

What are the benefits for students?

- We have found investigative learning to be the ultimate in differentiation. For example, the curriculum is modified specifically for the focus students. Additionally, students on the Autism spectrum, and students struggling with emotional development or fine motor development, can access tasks especially suited to them on a daily basis. Teachers are able to personalise learning on a deeper level than basic 'task modification' by actually personalising the environment for the child.
- Gifted and talented students are continually engaged. While investigative learning provides access points for all students, there is no 'ceiling' to tasks.
- The learning environment is perfect for fostering a 'flow' state. Working side-by-side with the teacher, students have the opportunity to consolidate skills to the point of mastery and work 'in task', displaying sustained interest and serious investment in their work.
- The experience eases the transition to school for Kindergarten students, since the learning environment is not such a big jump from the preschool environment.
- Higher achievement occurs in the writing strand, with a particular increase in the engagement of boys. 'Reluctant writers' cease to exist in the investigative learning environment, because writing tasks have meaning.
- Increased engagement reduces problem behaviors throughout the day and increases overall student wellbeing.
- Increased opportunities exist for the practical, daily application of contemporary learning skills (communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking).

What does investigative learning look like in other stages?

Investigative learning looks different in every stage. Stage 1 learning centres reflect current science and history topics, with provocations involving more complex language. Using 'experiment tables', whole class science tasks can be completed in students' own time throughout the term. In Stages 2 and 3, investigative learning can look more like project-based learning in agile workspaces, using technology to reflect on learning.

What about assessment?

Work samples produced during investigations are valid snapshots of a child's progress and can be used as assessments to inform reporting. Students are more likely to show us what they can really do in the context of investigative learning due to their high level of engagement. Inquiry-based learning means whole-heartedly embracing formative assessment – collecting data through observations and continuously assessing outcomes instead of regularly sitting all students down for one static assessment. Realising that not every student needs to be doing the same task at the same time in order to be assessed has been mind-blowing for some teachers! We have discovered that through working closely with the students in a structured rotation, we know our students really well and can describe where they are on the continuums more easily than in a traditional classroom set up.

How do you set up an investigative learning environment? What are the challenges for teachers?

While the payoff of having every child completely engaged in a task for up to two hours is a major carrot for most teachers, the setup of the learning environment does require a significant amount of work. In Kindergarten, we recreate at least one learning station per fortnight so the kids always have new provocations to tempt them. Wholly child-centered learning does not leave much room

for the teacher's own ego – you might set up a station you think is exquisite but experience most of your students rejecting it because you didn't pitch it right for their development level or interests. Trial and error are part of the journey of creating learning stations, and reflecting on your practice becomes a natural part of the day. We found truly allowing students to engage in their own way can be challenging for the control freaks among us! Teachers need to transition into a completely responsive way of teaching in investigations, to move wholeheartedly from the role of instructor to the role of facilitator. Thinking on your feet becomes essential as you link explicit teaching with your focus student's activity choice.

Open classrooms and flexible learning spaces also bring their own challenges. Working in one room with 58 kindergarten children and three teachers, it was crucial to build a coherent, shared education philosophy – a common understanding of what teaching and learning means. This means sitting down regularly to have big conversations – but the gift of having another professional consistently present to bounce ideas off and offer support is more than worth it.

For us, investigative learning has become an intuitive, professional partner dance of give and take, and of responsiveness, in which we choreograph learning not for our kids, but with them.

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Make a difference (MaD) – spotlight on teacher librarians

Murder most foul

Amber Sorensen, teacher librarian at Cherrybrook Technology High School, describes the evolution, benefits and cross curriculum connections behind her school's highly engaging 'Murder in the Library' program.

'Miss, did someone really die?!' was the question asked the day the body of the English Head Teacher was discovered in the library. A crime scene was soon established.

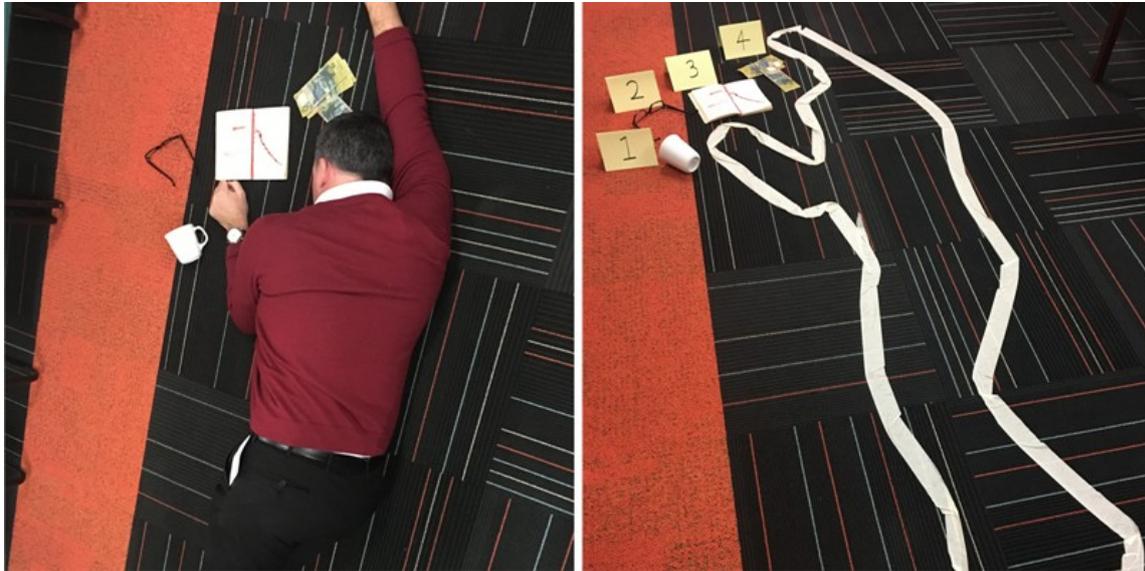
Collaboration with teachers and student engagement are at the heart of teacher librarianship. Since its inception in 2017, 'Murder in the Library' has provided opportunities for both. In the first year, the program used a study of the crime genre in Year 10 English as the anchor. I capitalised on my dual role as teacher librarian and English teacher and found an enthusiastic partner in crime in fellow English teacher, Gerry Brennan.

Two English classes worked together in the library for several lessons, interrogating the evidence in their files, questioning witnesses and orally presenting their theories, supported by evidence, on the identity and motive of the murderer. At the end of their presentations, the hapless murderer (me) was dragged away, loudly protesting and claiming innocence, by a very intimidating deputy principal.

Students enthusiastically devised some very interesting – and sometimes salacious – theories. Eagle-eyed students questioned why the teacher librarian was wearing a bandage across her wrist in the days after the murder and linked this to the coroner's report which confirmed that skin samples had been found under the victim's fingernails. Participants were engaged throughout the investigative process and thoroughly enjoyed it. Library visitors were similarly intrigued by the crime scene. Staff leveraged the opportunity to display both fiction and nonfiction crime books.

In 2018, we were joined by science teacher Magali Mello who introduced a forensic element to the program. This opportunity to introduce a cross curriculum component was exciting. Together with colleague Coni Halder, Gerry, Magali and I developed a new and more complicated storyline revolving around corruption. The most challenging aspect was working out which pieces of

evidence would be best to use. We wanted to incorporate some red herrings yet ensure the plot was discoverable – but not obvious. Including forensic evidence, such as blood spatter on the ceiling, casts of the weapon, footprints and handwriting samples, made the experience immersive and so much richer.



The crime scene

In its second year, the program was more flexible as classes were able to visit whenever they pleased to examine the evidence in a specially designated forensics lab. As well as hardcopy files, digital material (all the paper evidence plus CCTV footage) was made available via our learning management system.



Students examine the evidence

Due to its popularity, the program was extended. Altogether, 3 English classes and 7 science classes participated, with requests to run the program again in Term 4 for science and legal studies. The plot was recalibrated using the existing evidence.

With large numbers of students participating, it was not feasible to arrange interviews of witnesses or suspects, although one of the key suspects was treated to a surprise interrogation when he wandered into the library. We created student support materials including a glossary of medical terms, an outline of the task, a student report template and an analysis of evidence template. The reveal came by video. We recorded an interview between the murderer and our police liaison officer, and released it at the end of the program.

Feedback from teachers about student engagement has been overwhelmingly positive. One teacher has shown me the depth and detail of work from some students that usually do little, including a portfolio with detailed annotations of the evidence.

This year, we plan to integrate a specific text into the program. It will be linked not only to a study of forensics in science and the crime genre in English, but also to an examination of text and context. There are many other possible opportunities to expand further, incorporating other key learning areas, such as HSIE and TAS. Fortunately there are plenty of volunteers 'dying' to be involved!

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Genrefying nonfiction at Parkes High School

Tracy Dawson, teacher librarian at Parkes High School, outlines the process and benefits involved in reorganising the library's nonfiction collection into genres.

During the first half of 2018, I researched the concept of 'genrefying' our nonfiction section. With a student population of less than 600, borrowing statistics for this collection were pretty dismal.

I was particularly indebted to Jennifer LaGarde's article, **Genrefying your collection without changing call numbers** and the accompanying **step-by-step guide**, circulated by a colleague on the NSWTL listserv – thank you! When I looked at the checklist, we had already completed some of the steps; we were on the right track.

In the September school holidays, the library was recarpeted through an exciting floor-covering apprenticeship scheme. Fresh, brightly coloured carpet tiles were installed, echoing the existing colours in three zones which delineate function and purpose. Moving all the furniture in the library was the impetus for weeding nonfiction to an age of 5 years. (We decided that Kevin Hennah's recommendation of 2 years – from his **VISION 2020** seminar – was a little brutal for our budget.) Weeding proved crucial in reducing the scale of our project.



Part of the revamped 'Green zone' – a senior study area interspersed with nonfiction shelves

We then calculated how many shelves we needed and put our case for funding to the principal (using evidence of increased resource usage from Hennah's seminar). New black units were ordered (to make the colours pop) with face-out display. Three of the units are double-sided and on castors, so we can move them around to use the space flexibly.

Genres was selected, based on the curriculum and our students' interests. For example, with our huge focus on wellbeing, we created a genre (and therefore a shelf) called 'Health and wellbeing'. Some of the new genres are similar to Dewey classification anyway, and within each new genre books continue to be organised in Dewey order. In future, as the budget allows, we will buy more signs to indicate sub-topics (for instance, 'Bullying' within 'Health and wellbeing').



The 'Health and wellbeing' section

In summary, the process involved:

- deciding what the new genres would be (eg 'English', 'The Arts', 'STEM', 'The world', 'Study guides', 'Learning to learn' and 'New in nonfiction')
- physically placing books into genre piles
- reflecting on their placement and rearranging them if necessary
- creating new genres (as 'collections') in Oliver
- performing a multi-barcode search in **Copies** for each pile of books
- assigning these 'copies' to the new 'collection' (genre) using the global change function
- finding the list of recently changed 'copies' to create new spine labels (in **Copies/History**)
- re-shelving
- checking there is nothing left in the nonfiction collection.

As a result of the change, the 'Green zone' – where the nonfiction lives – is now a dedicated senior study area. The rearranged shelving has created small spaces for groups to study more effectively. (A shift which also accords with students' study preferences, expressed in a survey I sent to students, teachers and parents.)

Students and teachers love the more accessible, appealing format. A quick comparison of borrowing numbers from Terms 3 and 4 reveal that borrowing of nonfiction books more than doubled after division into genres. Beyond this, the state of the shelves each day reveals that books are also being picked up and used within the library. The face-out display means that resources are more readily viewed and accessed. For example, a dictionary never touched on the Reference shelf was plucked from the new English shelf. Similarly, students who don't routinely enjoy reading have been tempted by the presented nonfiction options, with topics and formats more appealing to them than fiction. With the help of our English colleagues, students are encouraged to borrow from both areas. Teachers too have expressed increased interest and amazement of some of the great resources we have.

Overall, the change was physically demanding but not brain surgery. We progressed systematically and the new, user-friendly layout brings a great sense of achievement!

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The unexpected benefits of sharing ideas

Jan Poona, teacher librarian at Rooty Hill Public School, reveals some unexpected benefits of mentoring colleagues and sharing ideas.

Mentoring

Over the past nine months, serendipitous opportunities have emerged to mentor other teacher librarians, including through our local teacher librarian network and Yammer.

Our teacher librarian network – the Penrith, Mt Druitt, Blacktown and Windsor (PMBW) Teacher Librarian Professional Learning Group – has been running conferences and afternoon meetings for decades, inviting colleagues to share ideas and skills and support one another. I've been a member of the committee for 26 years – and the group was already well-established when I joined! Since then, I've assisted with running conferences, served as a chairperson and treasurer, and presented at some conferences, including one in late 2017. From that presentation came a connection with the first of four teacher librarians I've mentored over the last year. We obtained permission from our principals to visit each other's schools, and we liaise via phone and email.

An informal lunch time discussion at the **PMBW Teacher Librarian Conference** in Term 2 opened the door to similar mentoring experiences with two other teacher librarians. As we chatted, these teachers expressed uncertainty about how to carry out certain library tasks and teaching activities. Following this conversation, both remained in touch to continue sharing ideas and knowledge about various aspects of library administration and teaching and learning. Again, I've visited their schools and return visits are planned in the future, including to observe each other's teaching practice.



A mentoring session with Jan

Inevitably, some connections form online too, including via the **Library Matters** Yammer group (accessible by teachers employed by the NSW Department of Education only). For instance, I saw a request by a teacher librarian seeking examples of colleagues' programming and library lessons for different grades. While our schools are in quite different parts of the state, precluding a visit, we

exchanged email addresses so I could send through some resources, and the online community responded with a range of supportive ideas.

External validation

Last year, our school underwent external validation. As part of this process, all staff were invited to submit evidence of how we were meeting our school goals. I submitted a few things regarding teaching and learning in the library and student achievement, just in case this helped to build the school portfolio.

As a spin-off from this, I was unexpectedly approached by the executive regarding my mentoring efforts; this work was of value in our school report! I was asked to write about it and to provide photographs.

Isn't it fantastic to think that the ordinary work many of us do in upskilling and supporting each other is regarded as such an important part of the evidence that our schools are fulfilling their role as leading educational institutions in our communities!

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