

Building connections within and beyond the library: Relationships and conversation that empower and inspire

By Dr Sue Wilson

Snapshot

Dr Sue Wilson explores the connections and relationships we can build to enrich and support the reading experiences and learning of our students and the wider community.

When thinking about ways we connect with life through reading, it is clear that there is great potential for the development of relationships that can inspire and empower. What is less clear, however, is how we can go about facilitating this. This article is written with the intention to inspire **you**, as school librarians, library technicians or other school staff, to dedicate a some time to thinking through ways that you can build those crucial connections that can make all the difference for young readers and learners.

Relationships, inspiration and empowerment

Observing the ways that literacies are enacted, and the social practices that are involved, is common practice for contemporary school library professionals (Gee, 1990; Luke, 2000; Street, 1984). We understand how the kind of talk that we are so passionate about fostering in our learning spaces can support the development of understandings of ourselves and our place in the world, as well as providing deeper knowledge around what and how we read (Baker, 1997; Cremin, 2007; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Patterson, Cormack & Green, 2012; Rosenblatt, 1978; Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). When we share our experiences, we can often provide inspiration

to others, particularly when we demonstrate enthusiasm and are mindful of the relationships that are involved (Cremin, 2007; Gee, 1990). Being transparent about what and how we 'do' the practice of reading, as well as what we find challenging or need to find ways to work through, provides a sense of empowerment for others. They may have similar struggles, or may need to see that they are not the only ones who find reading challenging, even if their experiences are somewhat different.

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We are well positioned to teach students to actively construct meanings by bringing their own knowledge to the fore or linking to experiences that they may have had. By doing this, students who may have found it difficult to understand a text might begin to actively shape their own meanings in relevant ways (Patterson et al., 2012; Rosenblatt, 1978).

These interactions between ourselves and our students influence and are influenced by the people involved, as well as their past and present experiences. In other words, when we have these interactions, the way this unfolds impacts and is impacted upon by each participant's background and present circumstances (Rosenblatt, 1978). In fact, even the future experiences that are perceived possible have a role to play in how we enact our identities as readers, students, colleagues and out-of-school individuals (Gee, 1990). The relationships we develop with one another also influence the ways that we engage with books, and the ways that we enact our own ways of being when we are interacting within the different communities that are central to our lives.

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We understand different world issues through the texts we read and discuss. Theorists and researchers such as Alvermann and Heron (2001), Arizpe, Farrell and McAdam (2013), Comber (2001), Cremin (2007) Sims Bishop (1990) and Wilson (2016) have influenced us to think about how we understand our world and our lives using metaphors such as that of a mirror, a window and a door. We can consider books to be a mirror into one's own previous life experiences, where there is the potential for self-awareness that enlightens us further into what has taken place in the past. This can improve our sense of belonging through seeing where and/or how we fit within a community. Sometimes we think of books as providing a window into the experiences or lives

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of someone else, allowing insight to develop around the unfamiliar. This offers potential for appreciation of diversity. Finally, literature can be considered to open doors between fantasy and reality, allowing some exploration of the taken-for-granted and of diversity. This holds potential for crossing boundaries into playful ways of exploring the unknown.

When we are open-minded, dedicated and approachable in our relationships and in sharing our experiences, exploring synergies between worlds, words and pictures, imagine the possibilities!

What counts?

The approach that we take, then, in order to remain approachable and open-minded, must put our students at the centre of focus. Research has shown that collaborative discussions increase student thinking outcomes, particularly when they are not teacher-led (Cremin, Burnard & Craft, 2006; Pantaleo, 2011). Conversations that take place within an environment of trust, where students can take risks in talking through their thinking and co-constructing ideas with peers allow for the exploration and deeper thinking that promotes learning.

However, it must be acknowledged that our school library spaces, just like our classrooms, are not places where everyone is empowered equally (Comber, 2001; Luke, 2000). It is necessary for each of us to consider which experience students in our learning spaces are 'allowed' to connect with,

in order to develop their understandings of the texts that they are engaging with. Even just acknowledging how important it is for us to give them choice in what they read is pivotal in developing empowering opportunities for book exploration and the kinds of effective talk that we seek to promote (Bang-Jensen, 2010).

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When we consider our students' interests and strengths, we can go a long way towards encouraging them to read, as well as providing an opportunity for them to know that their interests are valued. This, in turn, supports them to share the links that they make between their understandings of

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what they are reading and how these relate to their real-world experiences. When we value the different everyday literacies that they use and that they find significant, we provide them with greater opportunities to demonstrate competence (Ewald & Wallace, 1994; Lewis, 2001; Rex, Murnen, Hobbs & McEachen, 2002; Wilson & Rennie, 2019).

Students who are highly competent in out-of-school literacies such as navigating computer games with skill and strategy or 'reading' television or films can adapt these knowledges, but only if we allow them to make these kinds of connections within our 'academic' spaces. Allowing them to talk this through without devaluing the non-academic knowledges can support them to make links that, indeed, can become formalised. Often this will allow them to step into the kinds of academic thinking that is recognised within the more traditional school systems that we are accountable to (Wilson & Rennie, 2019). Associations that can be made between students' real-life experiences and the ideas that are generated through reading a range of texts can be surprisingly valuable, even when 'valuable' is defined in relation to meeting academic expectations.

These opportunities come through appreciation of diversity and enabling a range of responses to texts. Asking open ended questions, as we know, is important here, but more than this – it is our **acceptance** of the unexpected responses that sometimes ensue that is key to ensuring that these conversations continue. At times, this will bring about some tensions, but it is often during the times that we are uncomfortable that most learning transpires. These challenging instances often create the teachable moments that we seek.

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What counts in your own context?

With all of the above in mind, it is now over to **you**, the reader, to consider what counts in your own context. Ask yourself questions such as 'what do I think might be most 'effective' to inspire critical conversations around texts?' When considering 'which texts might I like to include?' remember to think about 'which literacies do they draw upon?' and 'which life experiences are valued?' or 'which connections are allowed to be made?'

Make a plan forward for how you might make even a small difference in the thinking around ways that individual learners' everyday literacies are valued. If each one of us shows that we care about developing environments that encourage the sharing of ideas and engaging with the world in a range of meaningful ways, then perhaps we can inspire readers that might otherwise become disengaged or feel devalued during the kinds of book conversations that traditional school environments have valued until now.

It is hoped that this piece of writing gives each of us, including the author, something to think about in our day-to-day interactions...

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Dr Sue Wilson worked as a primary teacher and ICT Coordinator before teaching and researching literacy education at Monash University. Her work explores the wide range of benefits to students in the use of quality literature as well as the development of literate identities. She has investigated pedagogical considerations in academic writing development and the implementation of book discussions, as well as barriers to effective student participation. Sue is interested in the ways that collegiate literacy discussions support connectedness, critical thinking, problem solving, and understandings of the world and one's place in it for learners of all ages. Sue values the engagement opportunities that she is able to foster through her work at Monash University, such as in her work with schools and community partners as well as in her research across international contexts.