

Building Investment and Engagement through Community-Linked Literacy Projects

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Summary: This article presents a rationale for community-linked literacy projects and describes two examples carried out in a middle school.

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Introduction

Traditional literacy curriculum for English learners often follows a predictable pattern. Students typically read texts that are scaffolded for comprehension and to explicitly build language proficiency. Vocabulary and grammar are contextualized in these texts and students are assessed on comprehension and targeted language and literacy skills. Writing tasks tend to follow conventional academic genres, e.g., persuasive essays, narratives, informational paragraphs, and are supported through structured writing processes from brainstorming to organization to revision and editing. When coupled with high quality instruction, these approaches have merit and can be effective. But they can also become tedious, abstract, and detached from students' interests, imaginations, and real-life concerns. At least this is what we were experiencing at the middle school where Jemlok was a Marshallese 8th grader.

Charming and quick-witted, he loved basketball and carried himself with the swagger of the NBA superstars he wanted to emulate. His confidence disappeared, however, when he was asked to read or write. As his teacher, I (Marcy) knew he was highly capable, but based on his years of mediocre grades and disappointing test scores, I wondered if his inability to shed the "English Language Learner" label might have taken a toll. As an ELD (English Language Development) student, Jemlok would claim that he wasn't good at reading or writing and often refused to read or write – unless it mattered to him. Unfortunately, school-based literacy tasks, which are often imagined and decontextualized, rarely seemed to matter to him.

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I can understand the lack of enthusiasm when students are asked to write a casual letter describing a hobby to a friend, as both the form and thesis seem outdated.

Troubled by the untapped potential in Jemlok and many other students in the ELD program, we wanted to stem their increasing disengagement from school. Rather than implementing literacy interventions designed to repair deficits in reading and writing, we wanted to involve them in literacy from a position of strength and authenticity. We were inspired by Paulo Freire's caution that literacy education should not "be viewed as a kind of treatment to be applied to those who need it in order that they may be quickly cured of their infirmity" (1978/2016, Letter 11, para. 6). What would happen, we wondered, if we engaged the students in community-linked projects with authentic opportunities to read and write? This is our personal story of taking what Bergetto calls a "beautiful risk" (Bergetto, 2019, p. 19) to re-vision how our ELD middle-schoolers might develop language and literacy skills aligned with established standards, but in new ways and within community-linked contexts. Offered in the spirit of storytelling, our intention is not to present research, data, evidence, or prescriptions. Rather, this narrative is an invitation to imagine possibilities.

The Boat Project

The "boat project" was the brainchild of Scott Franz, a community volunteer who had supported an after-school literacy program for ELD students at the middle school. He had watched the students (many of whom were Marshallese) shy away from books, but he was also aware that the Marshallese people were known for their remarkable skills at ocean navigation and sailing. "Why couldn't the kids build a boat?" he asked. Without knowing for certain that it was actually possible, we decided to focus the summer school ELD program around constructing a



Marcy, Scott Franz and the boat crew take a break to pose with their craft before outfitting the outrigger.

Marshallese-style outrigger canoe. With Scott in charge of the boat construction and Marcy leading the literacy and academic elements of the program, Anny (a university teacher educator) assembled a group of university students to support the project. Of course, none of this could have happened without the support of the school administration.

During summer school, we combined boat building with related lessons in math, literacy, visual arts, photography, and Marshallese cultural studies. For example, during a morning work session, students rotated through stations that included hands-on boat construction, learning about documentary filmmaking, writing captions for photos taken of the canoe-construction process, and creating art for the outside of the canoe. The culminating event was a field trip to a lake where we put the boat in the water – and to our delight, it was seaworthy!

The seamless integration of an ambitious, collective project with various forms of literacy seemed to allow the students to flourish. The early morning start time notwithstanding, they showed up day after day, participating not only in the canoe construction but with the academic lessons as well. The following excerpt written by a student illustrates the blend of pride and multiple forms of literacy and language generated from his participation in the boat project:

My favorite thing about being in the documentary group is editing the picture because if I had a picture that wasn't that good I could edit the picture and it will be beautiful... I learned how to use focus, brightness, exposure, and negative space. I also learned how to use rule-of-thirds and... how to edit like an average professional.

The project enabled Bobson to toggle between concrete, hands-on work (constructing the boat) and academic work (learning the academic language of photography while writing captions for photos). Notably, the aspects of the summer project that most closely reflected Marshallese

culture - canoe construction and visual art - served as entry points for academic literacy development.

The Art Walk Project

Emboldened by the boat project, our imagination led us to consider literacy from a different perspective: writing emerging from a local cause rather than simply a series of decontextualized writing tasks. Accordingly, our next project began with a discussion about an authentic need in the community--the lack of a map identifying the many public art pieces in our city. Gina Petrie, a faculty member from a second university, joined our partnership for this initiative which was carried out in the academic year during the regular school day as part of an ELD writing class. Dubbed the “Art Walk Project,” this project would culminate in students creating an annotated map of public art to be presented to the city council. Among other things, over the course of several months, students read about and analyzed images of art, wrote questions and interviewed local artists, wrote summaries of these interviews, and envisioned and wrote a proposal for a new piece of public art celebrating immigration. We went on a field trip to see several installations of public art and met one of the artists, who explained her process. On the last day, the students gave a brief speech (which they had written) to the president of our city council before handing him carefully folded, poster-size maps highlighting our community’s public art.

As with the boat project, we were amazed at the degree to which many students invested in the work. Our ELD students, who were accustomed to formulaic writing, were able to articulate unique ideas as to why, for instance, a statue they viewed lacked a head or arms. One of the middle schoolers wrote, “It represents war... the statue is saying the clothes are more noticeable than the person wearing them... the artist decided not to finish it because we often don’t finish projects we begin... the head and arms are invisible because the artist didn’t want viewers to see what they looked like.” In addition to students more thoughtfully expressing their ideas, we observed what seemed to be increasing stamina with the writing process itself. One student recalled “writing drafts over and over and over and over and OVER again!” while another commented, “I do feel confident in my writing because now I know that when I am writing nothing can stop me from writing.” One of Marcy’s favorite outcomes of the project was Ranson, a student with selective mutism, finally finding his voice. His classmates had grown accustomed to his inaudible author’s chair presentation, but by the end of the year, we were all able to, if just barely, hear his writing read aloud in his own voice.

Key Shifts

In reflecting on our experience, we identified three possible shifts in our thinking and design of literacy instruction

for English learners. First, we recognized the value of shifting from “literacy assignments” to “literacy causes” contextualized in the community. A literacy cause implies engaging in literacy practices for an authentic and urgent reason, something that has purpose beyond the confines of school. The perceived value of writing a persuasive essay to get a grade and earn points on a rubric is likely to be experienced as far less purposeful than, for example, writing a letter to a policymaker advocating for a new skate park in the community. Rhetorically, the two texts share similar features, but only the latter has a real audience and a genuine motive.

The second shift involves moving from a view that focuses on language as a prerequisite for participation in something truly meaningful towards thinking about language that can be derived from participating in something truly meaningful. Too often, we might unnecessarily assume that achieving a certain level of English language proficiency qualifies English learners for participation in authentic, challenging, and important activities, but until then, they’ll have to sit on the sidelines. While the language barrier may be a real and pressing consideration, it’s also true that active involvement in a compelling project can provide a rich source of linguistic input, opportunities for social interaction, and a strong motivation to learn new language.

Lastly, we shifted from considering projects that serve the curriculum to considering how existing curriculum might serve community projects. To illustrate, in designing the Art Walk Project, we mobilized the Common Core ELA/Writing standards to connect the official district writing

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curriculum with our community-linked project. But although we were certainly very familiar with the standards, we didn’t start with them. Instead, we led with the writing that naturally emerged from the community-based cause. Once we identified these writing causes—i.e., letters of invitation, research-based descriptions of the artwork, a speech for the city council—we perused the official textbook’s table of contents looking for curriculum that supported these writing causes. At the same time, we overlaid relevant Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The order of these priorities mattered. If our commitment to the pre-existing curriculum had been determining our plans, we might have ignored possibilities and reinforced writing pedagogy and practices that weren’t resonating with our students. However, by beginning with a clear vision for our students and a potent writing cause, it wasn’t difficult to integrate the prescribed curriculum. In fact, we discovered that the pre-existing writing curriculum and the CCSS could be genuinely useful.

Conclusion

While we’ve been highlighting the successful elements of these community-linked literacy projects, there were also many complications. Logistics, permissions, finances, assessment, and coordinating volunteer support were just some of the issues that challenged us. However, our impression that student investment, learning, motivation, and confidence seemed to increase as they participated in these projects made the effort and complexity well worth it. When students read and write with, in, and for their communities, the values and goals undergirding literacy practices change. Students were in disbelief, for example, that the emails they were writing to local artists would not only actually be sent out, but also elicit a genuine response. To write for a cause is to return to the central import of critical literacy: to reshape the world in the way you can imagine it. In this way, community-linked literacy projects have the potential to position English learners as readers and writers with agency, voice, and power.

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