

What to include in the literacy lesson

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There has been much debate over many years by teachers and educators about the best way to teach reading. Most of this debate is about learning to read in English and the issues usually come down to people taking one of two sides. One group feel strongly that teaching ‘phonics’¹ (the sounding out of word parts) is the place to start and then follow other ‘bottom up’ strategies. The other group feel strongly that a meaning based or holistic approach² (working with whole texts and using multiple ways of working out the meanings of that text) or ‘top down’ ways of teaching reading and writing are better.

Dr. Marie Clay, a well respected New Zealand educator, researcher and author said, Theories of reading cluster around two main views. One group of theories see reading as an exact process of seeing and saying words. A competing group of theories sees reading as a questioning or problem solving process, in which we search for meaning, sampling only enough visual information to be satisfied we have grasped the meaning of the text so far.³

But it should be noted that ‘Whole language’ ways of teaching should also include teaching phonics, otherwise it is not a holistic approach – it has left out a key strategy, phonics. On the other hand, key authors such as M. J. Adams (1990)⁴ who advocate strongly for a phonics based approach to reading instruction, also say that reading is about gaining meaning from print and that it is important to include lots of reading of meaningful texts in reading lessons. So the reading debate is usually over the starting point, not that phonics strategies or whole language strategies are bad. Readers actually need to learn both lots of strategies.

The important thing is that reading lessons do not get bogged down with the saying and sounding out of words or with drilling and skills development exercises. Ultimately, the main activity in any reading lesson should always be about students reading – practising all the skills they need to develop as they work with real, meaningful texts. The reading lesson is not about the teacher always reading, asking questions about comprehension or teaching grammar, vocabulary and reading strategies. Reading fluency can only be developed by learners actually reading and reading often.

And literacy is not just about reading things other people have written. Being literate means we can also write things for others or ourselves to read. Writing is also about

¹ The term Phonics is used to describe ‘the method of teaching reading which focuses on teaching letter-to sound correspondences and the subsequent ability to ‘sound out’ words’ (McCormick, 1990:1)

² A holistic approach to teaching reading says the reader needs to learn to recognise and use information perceived more broadly than just from information gained by sounding out individual words. Reading is using information from multiple sources to work out meanings of words, phrases and whole texts. Reading is inferring the meaning of an unfamiliar word from the words around it, from any picture clues, from the beginning sounds and from knowledge of the patterns of the language being read. Reading is also quickly confirming predictions about a word, word combinations and phrases that are quickly recognised.

³ Clay, M 1991, *Becoming literate: the construction of inner control*, Heinemann, Auckland, p. 14.







⁴ Adams, M.J 1990, *Beginning to read: thinking and learning about print*, Department of Education, Washington D.C.

learning phonics – making good choices about the sounds we use to build words and sentences. Writing fluency can only be developed by learners actually writing and writing often.

Every literacy lesson should include opportunities to do the following four things⁵:

1. Breaking and making the code – working out the letters and sounds and how they go together in syllables and words
2. Participating in the meanings of texts – Building understandings of the meanings expressed, predicting and responding
3. Thinking critically about the messages in the texts – what is really being said here and do I agree? Who is included? Who is excluded?
4. Taking the knowledge from the text and doing something with it

And the focus in all of these things should be on the learners doing the work, doing lots of real reading and doing lots of real writing. So the daily literacy lesson framework should include times when learners:

 <p>Read and participate in meaningful texts</p>	 <p>work on spelling & word choices</p>  <p>& develop as writers</p>
 <p>Discuss and critique meanings and views</p>	 <p>Do something to share the knoweldge with family or community</p> 

We don't necessarily spend equal time on each part of the framework, although we may do. But sometimes we may spend more time on one aspect than another. But each day we need to do something in each part of the framework. This framework should guide our lesson planning.

We can use any kind of text for the literacy lesson – a primer lesson, a newspaper article, a song, something one of the families or students have written, a story, a poem, or a portion from a Bible chapter or a history book.

The literacy lesson should take at least 1 ½ to 2 hours each time the class meets.

⁵ *These things are based on the work of Alan Luke and Peter Freebody (1995, 1999). See Luke, Allan and Peter Freebody 1999, A map of possible practices: Further notes on the four resources model, Practially Primay Vol. 4(2) pp 5-8. Luke and Freebody developed the concept of four sets of literacy practices or roles of the reader – code maker, text participant, text user and text analyst. This concept has been widely accepted and used in Australian education contexts and more broadly. It says that both phonics and whole language approaches are important but not elevated above each other or above other roles. All roles are important and one is not taught before another.*