

# I thought this was Social Studies, not English, Miss!

## Improving students' attitudes to reading and writing in Year 9 and 10 Social Studies

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### ABSTRACT

Low levels of literacy engagement by Years 9 and 10 students impact on their achievement in curriculum subjects such as Social Studies in New Zealand secondary schools. The majority of students entering secondary school possess sufficient foundation skills for further scaffolded subject literacy instruction, but some consistently resist or refuse to engage with text. Faced with this, the teacher works increasingly harder to compensate for reluctant readers and writers. This is the story of one teacher's changing practice as the result of professional learning in *The Secondary Literacy Project* (Ministry of Education, 2009-11) which has resulted in a substantive change in her Social Studies classrooms, with "resistive" (Tovani, 2000, p. 14) readers now significantly more motivated and engaged in negotiating and responding to challenging texts.

### Practice paper

**Keywords:** *Literacy engagement, social studies, student attitudes*

### INTRODUCTION

The current iteration of the *Secondary Literacy Project [SLP]* was implemented by the Ministry of Education at the beginning of 2009 in order to improve achievement outcomes for students having to retrieve, record and use information in complex ways in text-rich subjects. Independent reading and writing skills are vital prerequisites for these kinds of activities. A particular goal in the project was raising the literacy capacity of underachieving Māori and Pasifika students. This paper documents the approach taken by one teacher involved in the *SLP* in the central North Island. Kate, a teacher with seven years' experience, shares her experiences of students' changing attitudes towards reading and writing in her Years 9 and 10 Social Studies classes as a result of her new understandings about adolescent literacy acquired during the project. The teacher compares her approaches before and after her new pedagogical learning and evaluates the

improvement in students' attitudes to reading and writing in her classes as a result of the interventions put in place. At the same time, Kate is mindful of the need to maintain the curricular integrity of the compulsory junior secondary school subject - Social Studies.

Teachers are charged with negotiating and reconciling multiple and sometimes conflicting demands placed on them. The demands include current educational theories; political agendas articulated as education policies by such offices as the Ministry of Education and The New Zealand Qualifications Authority; school policies; and pressures from parents and students. At the beginning of 2010, Kate was very aware of her need to implement *The New Zealand Curriculum [NZC]* (Ministry of Education, 2007) in Social Studies, such as the conceptually-based strands and achievement objectives, values and perspectives, as well as the social inquiry process. In addition, Kate needed to integrate into her planning the generic requirements of the *NZC* such as the key competencies, current pedagogical approaches such as differentiation, co-construction and teaching as inquiry, as well as the school's literacy improvement initiative. By the beginning of 2011, Kate was ready to integrate these demands and implement them in her own way. In effect, she was negotiating the demands of the policy makers, mediating between policy & practice (Brain, Reid & Comerford Boyes, 2006). Specifically, Kate was reflecting, juggling, negotiating, questioning, conforming, rejecting all within the constraints of resources such as timetabling, students' resources, and teachers' resources. What follows is Kate's story of how she turned resistive readers and writers into engaged, motivated readers, set within the context of the *SLP* and educational theories.

### KATE'S KURA

Kate teaches in an urban, co-educational, low decile secondary school with a wide ethnic mix. In 2011, the school's role is 33% Māori, 31% New Zealand European/Pākehā, 8% Pasifika and 28% other ethnic groups. The school has traditionally had a large proportion of resistive readers and

therefore was invited to be part of the *SLP*. Broadly speaking, resistive readers are those who are able to read, comprehend and write responsively, but who choose not to, and resist teachers' attempts engage them through text in subject classrooms (Tovani 2000). Kate prefers to use the term '*reluctant*' readers.

The current kura is Kate's second school in her teaching career. In both schools, she has shown initiative in teaching a broad range of subjects and in consistently striving to find new ways to improve her practice in order to improve outcomes for her students. Throughout, Kate has actively sought new professional learning and opportunities to apply that learning in her practice.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT READING IN SECONDARY SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOMS

At secondary school, students go from class to class (five or six in a day) and typically experience three to five periods of Social Studies in a week. In any one day, the students are likely to encounter different teacher expectations about their ability to engage purposefully with text as they move from class to class. In fact, most students of Year 9 students are able to decode and comprehend independently ideas within a sentence and a paragraph that contains one idea. But do they understand how the set learning task requires them to read and write to develop connected conceptual understandings as required within the Social Studies achievement objectives of the *NZC*? Can they build new knowledge and understandings, purposefully analyse and evaluate the usefulness of what they are reading, and reconstruct the information in ways that differ from that set out in the text? The students must be able to comprehend text beyond literal levels into deeper and inferred levels of meaning, and to use the information in a number of ways because, in the Social Sciences, inferencing is instrumental to conceptual learning. The students need to engage deeply with primary and secondary source data to inquire into a topic or issue, and to provide evidence for writing a generalisation or paragraph or completing a graphic organiser.

Traditionally, Social Studies textbooks have been a major classroom resource though that is changing with the increased use of the internet and a plethora of audio and visual resources. Social Studies texts are typically complex and colourful, with pages full of visuals such as photos, maps, graphs and cartoons, blocks of continuous and non-continuous text, as well as activities and tasks. The textbook author seems to include on the page as much of what they believe is important for students to know and to understand.

Having to negotiate such complex texts, with little instructional scaffolding, can generate student resistance to reading them. The teacher has little understanding of why students cannot see the obvious in texts that he or she intuitively understands and can conclude, sometimes erroneously, that these students either can't read, or that they dislike Social Studies, or that they have discipline issues.

In secondary school Social Studies, students are generally reading complex information texts rather than personal narratives or fiction. Students need to read purposefully: that is, know clearly, prior to close reading of the text, what they have to find out, how to find it, organise it and record it, and how to reconstruct it to show they have understood it.

### KATE'S INITIAL PRACTICE

Like many Social Studies teachers, Kate traditionally supported her students in their reading in a number of ways. One approach was to use easy texts that didn't require students to really think, or she would strategically unpack the text and respond purposefully to its contents on the students' behalf. She would create worksheets and activities that would be manageable for weaker readers. Kate was keenly aware of students' typical ploy to feign inability/inadequacy as an early consequence of her *SLP* work. For example, students would complain the work was too hard, ask the teacher to summarise the reading, tell them the main points, write them on the board which the students would copy into their folders or exercise books - *game over* - rather than having to do the reading and retrieve information for themselves. This 'social contract' or informal expectation does not just occur in New Zealand schools. A US study of middle schools by Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko & Mueller (2001) reported that students are very clever at faking 'reading' by knowing

... how long to wait before turning a page to fool the teacher into thinking you are reading. Anyone who has listened to young people brag about such exploits cannot help but be impressed by their strategic intelligence and worried about the colossal waste of energy expended (p.80)<sup>1</sup>.

Kate frequently heard students say, "I thought this was Social Studies not English, Miss!" and "Why do we have to do this, Miss?" when she required them to read a Social Studies text or resource. Just as students have perceived literacy to be the realm of English teachers, Social Studies teachers have

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1 See also Tovani, C. (2000). The realities of reading, pp. 13-21.

often thought it was not their role to teach literacy skills (i.e. how to read and write “properly” for Social Studies). Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that they have often expressed the view that the English teacher was responsible for inculcating such skills. A further complication is that, in the absence of knowledge about adolescent literacy, teachers have generally adopted a dichotomous view of students’ literacy in their classes – those who can read and those who can’t. This viewpoint regards literacy as a threshold competency, rather than as a nuanced progression, that differentiates as students journey through to senior year levels, and into greater subject speciality.

### KATE’S NEW LEARNING

Kate engaged in professional learning through the *SLP* from 2010, as well as mentoring in the conceptual-learning approach to teaching Social Studies. Her work with the *SLP* made Kate aware that she was having to do too much additional work to support her students and that this would have to change. Kate realised that she was rewriting the texts students were to read and creating worksheets that made the work easier for the students. Like many teachers of resistive readers, she realised that she was doing much of the work her students should be doing and needed to redress the balance.

A key aspect of the *SLP* was to gather baseline data. Kate and her colleagues started analysing literacy data from the school’s Canterbury Tests (CEM) and e-asTtle tests which provided detailed information at whole cohort, class and individual student levels. Realising that the majority of the students could decode and construct meaning that is, they could read, Kate noted that a number of her students were, however, reluctant to do so. The *SLP* provided Kate with evidence of effective practice drawing on experiences of other teachers. In addition, she read and gained insights from *Effective pedagogy for social sciences/Tikanga-a-iwi. Best evidence synthesis (BES) iteration* (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008). The four *BES* mechanisms or guiding principles provide a ‘framework’ which Kate ‘hangs her Social Studies on’. When she explicitly planned for the four mechanisms - connection to students’ lives, alignment of learning experiences to important outcomes, building and sustaining a learning community and designing learning experiences that interest students - Kate found that student engagement improved. Students who understand that their learning is relevant, important and beneficial are better focused and more inclined to persist with tasks they find challenging. The *Effective Literacy Strategies* (Ministry of Education, 2004) provided examples of suitable literacy strategies whilst the *Te Kotahitanga*

*Project Phase One* (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003) challenged Kate’s assumptions of cultural views of Māori learners.

### BEST PEDAGOGIC PRACTICE

A key feature of the *SLP*’s best pedagogic practice relevant to facilitate learning from Social Studies texts, is the application of a purposeful inquiry methodology to reading and writing. This supports the finding and processing information aspects of the social inquiry process (Ministry of Education, 2008). The purposeful inquiry method used by the *SLP* requires that, firstly, a reading purpose statement is set at the beginning of the lesson prior to reading. This explains what content information students are required to find in the text. Secondly, the teacher sets a small number of focus questions - open inquiry questions (sometimes negotiated with the students) to help guide students to:

- (i) locate, retrieve and organise relevant information (for example to classify or categorise);
- (ii) monitor whether they accurately record relevant information; and
- (iii) monitor their understandings against the purpose articulated at the beginning of the task.

Thirdly, the teacher helps students to construct a way of recording information that reflects the reading purpose (e.g. using the text’s sub-headings in an info-graphic). This process requires students to make their own relevant notes, perhaps as a graphic organiser, rather than copy out ‘stuff’ from the text. These steps are important elements of an effective literacy instructional approach.

The above purposeful inquiry methodology activates all four components of literacy (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Students are encouraged to read, write, speak and listen alone and in groups in order to negotiate meanings, explore ideas and test understandings. This is a dynamic process that is managed by the teacher and changes his/her role in the classroom. The teacher focuses on scaffolding students into Social Studies literacy practices, using relevant and challenging text to grow deeper conceptual understandings from content knowledge. Retaining factual content knowledge is regarded as less important than developing the higher level thinking skills needed to articulate conceptual understandings. These conceptual understandings emerge, however, from subject content knowledge. This approach resonates with the concept-based approach to learning now advocated for effective pedagogy in Social Studies (Milligan & Wood, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2009).

The purposeful inquiry approach insists that teachers hold high expectations for students' achievement through a literacy-focused approach. It is pivotal that teachers hold high expectations of their students, a point reinforced strongly by student voices recorded in the *Te Kotahitanga Project* (Bishop et al., 2003). Underpinning this strategic approach to literacy learning in Social Studies is a clear non-negotiable expectation that students will become capably, that is, independently, literate and so are able to read challenging text.

### CHANGES IN KATE'S PRACTICE

As a result of her engagement in the *SLP* and the introduction of the conceptually based *NZC*, Kate began to change her practice by introducing a number of different expectations and behaviours. Kate placed an expectation on all her students at the beginning of their first year (Year 9) that they would read every day in her class. Often the text was not an easy one, but it would be one that they could learn from. She selected challenging texts that would focus learning towards meeting the 'big idea' or achievement objective that was the focus of the Social Studies learning. She refused to engage in the argument that "I thought this was English, not Social Studies, Miss". She made it very clear that resistance was futile. One student commented:

*There's a lot more reading than I expected but I got used to that. Miss doesn't let us stop reading.*

Kate now very clearly establishes the purpose of the reading with her students, using the purposeful inquiry method introduced in the *SLP*. She believes that it is more effective for student engagement if they are taught to write their own purpose for reading – and thereby turning it into an inquiry task, not just a literacy task. Kate explains that if students understand what they need to learn and know why they are learning it, then they can then go on to look at a piece of text asking "What do I need to find out from this?" Once they set their own purpose for reading, they are on the way to becoming self-directed learners. With a certain amount of assistance, this process also works to effectively differentiate a task. For instance, students can set the purpose for reading at their own level. Without help, some students set their expectations too high and others too low. Kate has been very clear and consistent in teaching and reinforcing strategies to help students meet these challenges. In so doing, Kate's practice has changed from infrequently trying new strategies to a position where she consistently uses instructional literacy approaches to requiring students to regularly read challenging text. Challenging texts

are regarded as those that students are unfamiliar with; that they will find challenging and will not be able to read independently; and that they might otherwise resist engaging, saying they have read it, but don't get (Tovani, 2000). For example, Kate challenged her students with an eight-page article from *The National Geographic* on the Chernobyl Disaster as part of a unit addressing the big idea of people's response to challenge and crisis. As one of Kate's students expressed:

*I feel more knowledgeable after reading the article and I probably wouldn't have understood as much without the reading strategies.*

*At the end of the [National Geographic] article, I felt proud of myself as I didn't believe that I would even finish reading half of it.*

Kate reflects on the literacy approach she has used to support Social Studies learning by providing students with strategies to navigate texts:

*In the past I have simply made assumptions that all students can navigate visually complex texts, make links between images, graphs, tables and text, and that they can make sense of the layout of the book. After struggling with students who weren't getting as much out of the texts as I expected, in the past two years I have explicitly taught students how to navigate unfamiliar texts. I now have students who can find their way around complex pages with ease, make connections and are able then to move onto higher order tasks, simply because they now understand how the page is put together. Also they understand the importance of doing that before they start reading. They don't assume that they're stupid because they don't get the book. They start looking for the cues that will show them how to find their way around this text.*

Critical literacy is also a skill which Kate teaches her students. When students understand that writers construct text for a purpose, they can begin to look at the differences in texts aimed at different groups of people:

*I am constantly asking my students who manufactured the text, who the text is aimed at and how they can know that. Then the question becomes how does that change the nature of the information you will get from the text? When students realise they have the power to rank texts as to their usefulness, the text doesn't scare them anymore. The students are the ones in control.*



To what extent have these changed expectations and strategies improved students' attitudes to reading and writing in Kate's Social Studies classes? Kate's observations of the students in the classroom show that students now read more complex material and more of it, are more willing to read, read more independently and exhibit greater levels of self-efficacy, and have developed deeper conceptual understandings and higher order thinking skills. Kate's conclusions are supported by students' results in the 2010 pre- and post- e-asTTle testing which showed a 2 sub-level improvement (3 Advanced to 4 Proficient, a statistically significant shift of 30 asTTle reading scale points). Evidence which supports changes in students' attitudes towards reading more challenging texts and in writing are also heard in student conversations, for example:

*One thing I learned was to read the purpose for the reading before I read the article so I knew what I was looking for when I answered the questions.*

*I like the hard reading even though sometimes I need help to understand it. When I finish the hard reading, I feel really brainy.*

Other positive outcomes of using a literacy approach to teaching Social Studies include Kate's careful planning, integrating the many demands, writing clear literacy learning outcomes that sit alongside Social Studies learning outcomes, the use of literacy templates, and being able to hand over the responsibility for learning to the students.

## MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF SOCIAL STUDIES

Kate has maintained the integrity of Social Studies in her programme by focusing clearly on the concepts within the Level four achievement objectives (Ministry of Education, 2007) and selecting one as the focus for each term. She develops the selected conceptual understandings (big ideas) with her class by using the social inquiry approach to encourage students to ask questions, retrieve information, process the information using a variety of strategies, explore values and perspectives, write generalisations to demonstrate their understanding of the big ideas, and reflect on their findings (Ministry of Education, 2008). This is facilitated by her use of literacy strategies to engage the students with the source materials. Moreover, she provides a differentiated approach where students have a level of choice within a range of activities, carefully structured around the higher order thinking skills of Bloom's Taxonomy. The choice and constant feedback further empowers her students to attempt and

succeed at tasks which scaffold their learning towards the conceptual understandings. All these design elements mirror current practices in Social Studies (Ministry of Education, 2007; 2008; 2009).

By challenging and extending her students beyond their presumed capabilities, Kate is also opening her students to the specialised language, conceptual understandings and discourses of Social Studies. This is an essential but often undervalued role of a teacher. Whitty (2010), drawing upon the work of educational sociologists Michael Young and Basil Bernstein, strongly argues that students from relatively educationally-disadvantaged backgrounds must be enabled to access the "powerful knowledge" (p. 31) of curriculum subject discourses which they are not likely to receive in their homes. Subject discourse consists of both the specialist language and the ways of thinking, knowing and doing that are specific to a discipline, and which students must master in order to succeed. By enabling all students to access subject discourses, social divisions can be reduced with students being able to achieve and continue to higher levels of education in that subject or discipline.

In order to achieve Whitty's goals, Moje (2006) and Luke (1995-96) argue that students are required to independently reproduce subject content knowledge using the subject's discourse; that is, to be an historian or geographer is to be able to read, write and think in accordance with discourse conventions of these subjects. This helps explain why literacy is a particular challenge, and for some students an impenetrable barrier, to working successfully in subject domains. Students may be capable readers of narrative texts (for example), but are unable to communicate receptively or productively with text written in the specialist discourse of a given subject. This failure locks students out of further substantive learning, and academic progress in that subject (Luke 1995-96).

Kate has responded to the complex challenge of teaching Year 9 and 10 students with sufficient skills and strategies to decode and comprehend text at literal or surface levels, for example to find information in response to a specific question, but who are ill-equipped for increasingly complex subject reading and writing tasks demanded by subject discourse conventions. The transition from Year 8 into Year 9 is described by Luke and Woods (2009) as a threshold students are expected to cross into the specialist registers and discourses of disciplinary knowledge contained in written subject texts, and in teachers' oral instructional discourse. Kate has expected her Year 9 and 10 students to read increased volumes

of challenging texts written within the discourse conventions of Social Studies. In order to cross that discourse threshold, she has adopted an instructional approach that scaffolds students into these texts: enabling them to comprehend and understand content knowledge to depths greater than previously when she had she compensated for her students' apparent lack of literacy abilities, by doing much of the work for them.

## CONCLUSION

Just as adolescent literacy is regarded by the SLP as a progression rather than a competency, Kate's professional practice is constantly progressing. This reflects her deep thinking and concern for her students, and is evidenced by a creative problem-solving approach to her work. By changing the way she approaches literacy, Kate has found it relatively simple to incorporate all of what she considers to be key aspects of current educational theory, both in general and specific to Social Studies, into a very straightforward framework that supports students to do the work based on a structured approach to a challenging text. Further, her students' improved engagement in Social Studies and willingness to tackle challenging texts has positive consequences for both the students and Kate. Students now understand that literacy is more than English, and that it happens across the curriculum, including their learning in Social Studies. By sharing her story, Kate hopes that she will inspire other teachers to adopt this approach in their Social Studies classrooms, because as Renner so aptly observed in relation to changes in Social Studies education in the 1970s, educational innovations tend to spread "homophilously" (1976, p. 110); that is, teachers learn best from fellow teachers rather than from persons holding a higher or lower status.

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