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Anne Keary
Monash University

Narelle Wood
Parliament of Victoria

Karina Barley
Monash University

Kelly Carabott
Federation University

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Generating Reflections Through Professional Collaborative Storytelling

Anne Keary
Monash University.
Narelle Wood
Parliament of Victoria
Karina Barley
Monash University
Kelly Carabott
Federation University

Abstract: For teachers, storytelling is a way of making sense of everyday pedagogical practices and connecting with colleagues. In this paper, we explore how storytelling contributed to a collaborative culture indicative of our professional journey as four teacher educators. We examine six online weekly Zoom conversations we participated in as a teaching group to share our pedagogical ideas for enhancing an English education unit of work. During this storytelling, we discussed how we engaged with the teaching of, teaching about and teaching through the teaching and learning curriculum cycle to a first-year cohort of preservice teachers (PSTs). Importantly, we deliberated on how we could make our pedagogical decision-making visible to PSTs, illustrating the importance of teacher collaborative storytelling. We contend that by creating time and an online space for us as teacher educators to share, consider, evaluate and think collectively about pedagogical practices we not only developed a better understanding of our subject area but provided a collaborative professional learning model to our PSTs. We hope that other English teachers may read a little of their own professional journeys in our storytelling and be encouraged to engage with a professional collaborative dialogic space. This paper does not purport to suggest that this is the only way to teach English education to PSTs. Rather, it is about making visible who we are as learners and our practice as teacher educators and storytellers.

Introduction

This paper explores how we, as four teacher educators, engaged with professional storytelling to collaboratively teach a first-year university subject English education unit of work. We began this exploration with a conversation about the unit we would be teaching, considering whether our conversations could be seen as research. The ensuing “conversations”, like Nunan and Choi (2010), we suggest, “opened up a raft of questions and dilemmas” (p. 1). What emerged was an idea to teach the unit while simultaneously working through and “researching” aspects of the unit ourselves. That is, we planned to demonstrate teaching, learning and storytelling to the cohort of primary and secondary preservice teachers (PSTs). Through storytelling we were able to model our thinking and teaching about the

teaching-learning cycle (T&L cycle), simultaneously furthering our own thinking about this five-stage pedagogical framework.

By engaging with collaborative professional conversations, teachers partake in ongoing professional learning. This paper is interested in how we, as four teacher educators, developed a professional collaboration through weekly online storytelling activities. Shank (2006) describes the purpose of teacher storytelling: “The storytelling helped the teachers create a collaborative learning space, link the personal-private realm of teaching to the public-conceptual realm, reflect on their teaching and see new practical directions, and co-construct a shared understanding of good pedagogy” (p. 711). This critical reflective storytelling was a way of re-envisioning our own practice as teacher educators enhancing our thinking about the T&L cycle as a curriculum and pedagogical process. In addition, the storytelling provided us with a deeper connection to subject English education, and more importantly, we believe, provided an enhanced pedagogical experience for the PSTs.

As teacher educators, we recognised that we make assumptions that PSTs will gain pedagogical knowledge in a type of “organic” way, transferring our modelled teaching practices to their own teaching scenarios. The research problem centred on how we, as teacher educators, could support each other in making explicit to the PSTs how we were modelling teaching pedagogy as well as teaching about the T&L cycle. We asked how we could support and encourage PSTs to apply and adapt this pedagogical knowledge to their own teaching context.

The research is set in the state of Victoria, Australia where approximately 20% of school students are of language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE, Education Victoria, 2021). The Department of Education (DET) Victoria (2022) provides teacher support for the teaching of the subject English through its online Literacy Toolkit, which gives strategies and resources for English literacy across the Victorian curriculum. A feature of the Literacy Toolkit is the T&L cycle. The T&L cycle also featured in our subject English education unit, along with Luke and Freebody’s (1999) Four Resource Model. In the next section, we provide an overview of the T&L cycle. We draw on Derewianka and Jones’ (2016) adaptation of the T&L cycle, as DET Victoria (2022) consulted with Derewianka regarding the T&L cycle work on the Literacy Toolkit.

The four teacher educators are experienced educators in the literacy field. Teacher Educator 1 worked as an early years teacher for five years incorporating the T & L cycle into her practice. Teacher Educator 2 was a literacy educator across the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors for twenty years. Teacher Educator 3 has been an educator for over 30 years with experience in primary and special education settings. Teacher Educator 4 has been teaching at the tertiary level for 12 years as a literacy specialist. Teacher Educators 1 and 4 taught in the focus unit through various iterations over a period of four years, Teacher Educator 3 for three years and Teacher Educator 2 for the duration of the project.

The Teaching and Learning Cycle: An Overview

The T&L cycle was chosen as a focus of the subject English education unit as it provides for the integration of literacy and subject knowledge and provides EAL (English as Additional Language) learners with the time and opportunity to practice and rehearse new language and skills over time (DET Victoria, 2022). Given the high percentage of LBOTE students in Victorian schools and taking into consideration that a cohort of the PSTs who undertook the unit of study were English as Additional Language (EAL) learners we include in our discussion how the strategy of supported writing stage, a stage in the T&L cycle, can assist these learners.

The T&L cycle aims to support teachers to plan and implement a sequence of designed interactions based on a specific topic and genre (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). Derewianka and Jones (2016) state that “the teaching-learning cycle takes the texts or genres associated with the different purposes for using language [e.g. persuading, arguing, informing] as the starting point for teaching literacy” (p. 51). Originally it came from the work of Rothery (1996) and focused on teaching writing.

The T&L cycle has been used to teach EAL students because of its explicit focus on teaching language in context. Oral language learning is central to this pedagogical framework with a key focus being on dialogue and how meanings are constructed collaboratively. The cycle is underpinned by the notion that learning language supports making sense of the world. In recent times reading has become a feature of the cyclical process (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). This strengthened the decision to utilise the T&L cycle for this unit of work; we wanted to focus on the relationship between reading and writing, as well as collaborative work, especially with the second assessment task where the students were required to create a group picture storybook with this cyclic process in mind.

The T&L cycle involves a five-stage framework that is designed to extend the language and literacy skills of students while developing specific curriculum field knowledge. The first stage, building knowledge of the field, is about the teacher instigating and creating a shared understanding of a topic. The second stage, supported reading, focuses on “developing students’ appreciation of the topic at hand, their enjoyment of reading and their comprehension and decoding skills as relevant to their needs” (p. 53). Stage three focuses on modelling and deconstructing the genre being studied. It considers function, purpose, structure and key language features. The teacher provides support to students in the fourth stage through joint construction of writing. It connects spoken language with written language and centres on the process of preparing and writing a text. The fifth stage is independent construction, where students write their own texts, at times with teacher support (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). It was a logical progression for our PSTs to use these five steps in the construction of a picture storybook that could be read to primary students. This would have the dual process of (1) constructing a book for primary-aged students and (2) experiencing the five stages of the T&L cycle so as to understand what this process would be like for their future students.

The use of the narrative genre in the primary school subject English unit worked at a meta-level for the teaching of the T&L cycle. First, it teaches about the narrative genre through deconstructing the narrative form and exploring associated language features. Second, the PSTs were then required to compose a narrative, drawing on these features, at the same time planning how they would use the T&L cycle to teach narrative to primary school students. Each week, in our planning meeting we used short stories – narrative reflections – to share with our students our pedagogy and thinking behind our practices. A conceptualisation of the teaching with, about and through the T&L cycle is shown in Figure 1.

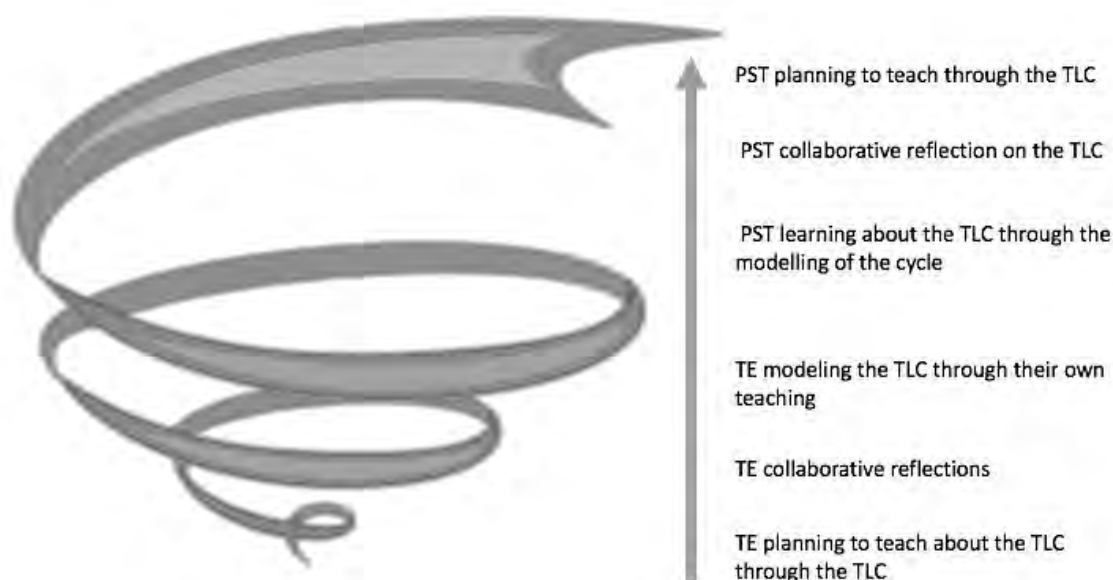


Figure 1: The conceptualisation of the recursive process of teaching about and through the teaching-learning cycle (T&L cycle). In the image TE is an acronym for Teacher Educators and TLC is the acronym for T&L cycle.

In teaching the T&L cycle “the changing role of the teacher is a particularly important aspect of the teaching-learning cycle” (Derewianka & Jones, 2016, p. 54). We shifted between leading the instruction to facilitating activities and scaffolding PSTs understanding. Explicit teaching occurred at times while at other times models were provided of key text-types. Scaffolding took place as we supported PSTs with some aspects of the tasks and then gradually released responsibility to them to work more independently (Wood et al., 1976). The next section we explore the notion of teacher storytelling.

Storytelling: Creating a Professional Learning Space

Teacher storytelling takes the form of sharing ideas about pedagogy and issues of practice. Stories are, what Watson (2007) describes as, “the ephemeral narratives emerging in everyday mundane contexts” (p. 371). Stories are intricate and multifaceted. Shann (2015) writes that they “acknowledge and speak to life’s complexity; and they have the potential to penetrate, to move, to have an impact, in deep and significant ways” (p. 4). Storytelling can be linked to professional learning that enables teachers to “reconceptualise classrooms ... as sites where people come together to share their experiences by telling stories and imagining possibilities” (Doecke, 2015, p. 144). While Author et al. (2019) argues that narratives such as the ones we present here can “provide insights into the becoming of subject English teacher educators who have ‘struggled’ and are ‘struggling’ with a range of tensions in their professional practices” (p. 5).

Teaching as a practice is jam-packed with stories. Teacher educators share stories about their professional experiences and PSTs have shared stories with teacher educators about their professional placement experiences. Storytelling provides an authentic aspect to pedagogical discussions as they start from real cases and are a way of engaging with challenging issues providing practical responses to implement (Mundy, 2019).

For language teachers and language and literacy teacher educators who are on a journey of professional growth, stories may entail narratives told in classrooms, or narratives told about preparation, evaluation and reflection on teaching. Storytelling gives us insight into how teaching practice is conceptualised, and decisions made and interpreted (Vásquez, 2011). Vásquez, in a 2007 study, explored post-observation meetings between early career EAL teachers and their mentors. Collaborative discussion emerged and was jointly constructed and negotiated in the broader context of the mentoring dialogue. The early career teachers were reflective, at times certain, uncertain and even doubtful – with the teachers' interlocutors co-constructing these positionings. Similar reflective moments occurred in our sharing of teacher educator stories, with moments of certainty, uncertainty and doubtfulness.

Narrative in the form of a small story can provide a conceptual framework for research. Juzwik (2004) investigated in her research how a teacher employed narratives in the classroom. As with this paper, Juzwik (2004) suggests that narrative can act as a resource for communicating information in a type of “experience-near pedagogy” (p. 381), which we also explore in this paper. As teacher educators, “we story our lives in many different ways” (Vásquez, 2011, p. 543). The following transcript excerpts and analysis of weekly online conversations are stories that provide insight into not only the teaching of the T&L cycle but how as teacher educators we shaped the curriculum and pedagogical experience for PSTs and made sense of our professional practice in teaching a subject English education unit. As teacher educators we enacted a form of “experience-near pedagogy” (Juzwik, 2004, p. 381).

Throughout this paper, we explore how storytelling through the crafting of storylines (Bruner, 1990) helped us make sense of the complex and diverse setting in which we teach. Langellier's (1989) theoretical framework of the role of personal narratives in our everyday interactions is drawn on in relation to communication, performance and interpretation. At one end of his continuum is the individualistic view of narrative as a means of self-representation. While at the other end personal narrative is seen as a way of negotiating power relationships within social settings. We argue that our storytelling is positioned in the middle of the continuum and is centred on conversational interaction. Our stories were mutually constructed with a meaningful purpose in the present although linked to past experiences and future possibilities.

We suggest that oral real-time storytelling in teacher education research, in recent times, is less evident. Contemporary educational research focuses more on digital forms of storytelling in professional practice and for professional learning (see Schuch, 2020; Yasar-Akyar et al., 2022) rather than collaborative oral storytelling. Like Del Negro (2021) we understand storytelling as fulfilling “critical social and individual needs” (p. 3). Through storytelling we connect our actions to our thoughts and emotions helping us to create new possibilities in our teaching (Noddings, 1991). In the following section we show how storytelling supported us in gaining a better understanding of our own and each other's teaching practice building collegial relationships.

Methodology

Our storytelling and understanding of the T&L cycle were founded on our ongoing collaborative discussions that took place during the teaching of a subject English education unit of work (aimed at primary school age students) to first year preservice teachers during the second semester of the university calendar year. As teacher educators, we were all experienced with teaching the subject English education at different year levels of undergraduate teacher education courses. However, this was the first time we had worked as a teaching team.

We began with a professional learning session presented by an expert in the field of systemic functional linguistics and language teaching. Through this professional learning activity, we developed our own individual, as well as collective understandings of the T&L cycle. As educators, we initiated weekly online conversations and professional reading where we discussed how we would teach the unit and also how we would model the T&L cycle during each week's workshop.

The T&L cycle project was connected to an Australian state-based professional TESOL (Teacher English to Speakers of Other Languages) teaching association collaborative T&L cycle project. This project was undertaken by a range of EAL teachers working in schools, and adult and higher education sectors. These educators became researchers of their own practice and shared their teaching experience of the teaching-learning cycle in the form of artefacts such as teaching plans, video clips of practice, reflections and examples of student work (see victesol.vic.edu.au). Our aim was to recreate this practice but adapt it for our PST cohort.

A subject English education unit of work for the primary years, designed around the T&L cycle, was taught at two campuses of a large research-intensive university in Melbourne, Australia. It was a core unit for the Primary and Secondary Honours Education course including the areas of Inclusive Education and Health and Physical Education. The unit introduced PSTs to the complexities of teaching subject English education to diverse groups of primary school students, developing theoretical perspectives on learning and teaching. The aim was for PSTs to build their own knowledge of subject English while developing an understanding of the subject English curriculum for schools across the interrelated strands of language, literature and literacy.

One hundred and eighty PSTs undertook the unit, with international students, mainly from mainland China, accounting for 20% of the cohort. The course was made up of ten workshops (24 hours of tutorial time in total, which combined an online lecture and a workshop) that did not require compulsory attendance. The PSTs were required to complete two assessment tasks with the second assessment task involving a small group project and an individual reflective journal around the T&L cycle curriculum plan for the primary years of schooling. The assessment required the PSTs to plan for the teaching of a picture storybook using the T&L cycle (see Appendix). The PSTs created these picture storybooks and were encouraged to use language as a resource with some of them creating bilingual texts.

The four teacher educators (TE1, TE2, TE3 and TE4) met online each week to prepare and discuss the following week's workshop. These 45- to 60-minute conversations were recorded, transcribed and edited. The weekly discussion centred on the PowerPoint, activities, lecture unit readings, and online resources, which each educator took in turns to create. Each week there was a focus on a different stage of the T&L cycle. As teacher educators, along with the PSTs, we created our own T&L cycle plan for the teaching of a unit of work to make visible to each other and model for the PSTs our teaching practices. Part of the second assessment task was a reflective journal, therefore we also made available to the PSTs our own weekly reflective journal excerpts. We viewed this as another way of modelling practise to our PSTs.

The importance of the online conversations is highlighted in the excerpts below. As well as our planning for the workshops, these stories also foreground the choices made about content and pedagogy and the kinds of initiatives we took based on our professional judgements, readings, and collective knowledge. Our intent was to support PSTs in developing as language and literacy educators, and to give them a solid grounding in teaching language in context by using the T&L cycle as a framework. It was also valuable and important to demonstrate that as educators – whether as preservice teachers or teacher

educators – learning, reflection and developing practice is an organic and evolutionary process (Parr & Bulfin, 2015).

The storytelling excerpts related in this paper show us negotiating how to work with PSTs during six workshops around the T&L cycle and associated assessment task. As the unit progressed, each week we negotiated, through stories, the choices we made about the subsequent workshop focus and content, and how to make workshops meaningful, engaging and interactive for PSTs. Some of our stories capture the thinking behind these choices, as we reflected upon our pedagogical practices and the learning needs of the PSTs. When reading about the decisions we made relating to the unit content, pedagogy and resources, the intention was to consider our collective pedagogical practices for teaching literacy and language in context (Derewianka & Jones, 2016).

Thus, through the teaching of the subject English education unit and the writing of this paper, we have reflected and come to a better understanding of our teaching practice through the use of storytelling. Furthermore, storytelling has enabled us to identify and clarify a collaborative way to teach the T&L cycle to a diverse group of PSTs undertaking the unit.

Findings and Discussion

The Process: Teacher Educator Storytelling

In the following section, the online teacher educator storytelling is explored in terms of the collaborative professional learning space. The focus is on the thinking behind how to teach, teach through and teach about the teaching-learning cycle and the reflective nature of undertaking teaching at such a meta-level. The focus of this analysis is not on the T&L cycle as such and therefore, not all of the five stages of the framework are represented.

Collective Professional Practice: Building the Field

Building the field is the first stage of the T&L cycle. At this stage, “the teacher designs and leads activities to begin to build shared understandings of the topic” (Derewianka & Jones, 2016, p. 53). TE4 drafted the workshop content for this week’s teaching and led the online meeting. She began the discussion by referring to the work of Pauline Gibbon’s (2005) and the notion of message “abundance”. Message abundancy refers to the way “in which a number of meaning-making systems are deployed in the teaching and learning of concepts” (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005, p. 17). TE4 commented on how she pointed out this notion to the PSTs, “I used Gibbons’ work because I think that it’s really important that I talk to the PSTs about the importance of message abundance”. She spoke to the PSTs about how building the field occurs in a range of ways, “and that when we’re building the field and building knowledge about a topic, whatever that topic might be, it’s really important that we allow students, through a multimodal approach, to be thinking about the many different ways that we can make meaning.”

The idea of multimodality and multimodal (Kress, 2010) texts were examined with PSTs earlier in the semester. Now TE4 revisited the idea of multimodality as a way to discuss the importance of building the field by providing students with access to similar ideas and information using a range of modalities to assist with meaning-making. These modalities may include the spoken word, written text and visual images. TE4 continued, “It’s really important that we give school students a whole variety of different ways to make meaning.

And then in that information transfer, so thinking about how do we then shift from that oral [class discussion] to the written?”

TE4 used a range of short YouTube clips to explore a key theme from the picture storybook *The Coat*. The theme was “Can clothes change your perception of who you are as a person?”. She drew on the pop culture stories of *Spiderman* and *The Mask* to build a shared knowledge about the theme. TE4 talked about the thinking behind her choices:

I had to really think about how I could build the field before I read the text “The Coat” to the PSTs... I particularly used videos in this instance because, up to that point we actually hadn’t used videos to think about building up content knowledge.

She explained how she wanted to make relevant connections for the PSTs: “It wasn't just about reading another picture story book with that particular theme; that we could actually do it with videos as well. We could do it using pop culture. (TE4)

The video activities were interactive and focused on building a shared language linked with the theme that clothes can change who we are. These multimodal activities, like the narrative genre, were both entertaining and introduced insights into the human condition, i.e., in this case the idea of building confidence through the wearing of a costume. The video clips were a stimulus for discussion and set the scene for how a story can begin to unfold.

Similarly, the teacher educator online conversation set up a way of explaining in the workshops the pedagogical thinking behind building the field, and an exploration of the social purpose of the narrative genre. TE4’s interest in multimodality served to make the workshop activities purposeful, meaningful and engaging, and like the unfolding of a narrative, introduced the context and theme for, in this case, the preservice teacher audience.

As a result of TE4’s sharing of her reflections through stories, we were also able to build our teaching practices making this stage of the T&L cycle more meaningful to ourselves. TE4’s reflections on the thinking that was behind her decision-making helped to explain how she could link this stage of the T&L cycle to PSTs’ everyday cultural practice, that is, pop culture. The storytelling enabled the teacher educator group to grow both their own individual and collective professional practices through the professional knowledge of TE4.

Reflective Dialogue: Learning About the Narrative Genre

The next stage of the T&L cycle involved learning about the genre, in this case the narrative genre. Being adult learners, the PSTs had most likely been immersed in narratives from early childhood. However, these narratives were grounded by a range of cultural traditions taking on various structures and language resources. In this unit we were focusing on a particular culturally bound version of the narrative tradition. An aim of the workshops was to not only teach about the content but also to model pedagogical strategies which PSTs could adapt and use for their own teaching purposes. TE1 shared with the tutors her thoughts about how to introduce the narrative genre to the PSTs through narrative writing:

Our focus is writing stories. In past years, we’ve asked the students to construct a text in five minutes. Because we’re focusing on narrative, I thought we could ask them to write a short story without giving them too much background about the structure of a narrative text... They will write for five minutes. We will give them the audience for their narrative...

The next step in this process, TE1 explained, was for the PSTs to deconstruct each other’s narratives as a means of consolidating their understanding of the structure of a narrative text. TE1 described how, “they [can] read each other's narrative, identifying its

purpose, some genre features, the language. Hopefully through this activity they will begin to unpack the structure of a narrative text” (TE1).

Stories are a highly valued genre in the curriculum and, in the primary years, are a familiar springboard for students to compose their own writing. The idea of the workshop activity was that a narrative would be a well-known form of writing for the PSTs. The narrative, and resulting storybook, could therefore act as the focus of a small group and whole class initial writing conference about the structure and language features of the narrative genre. The activity was also about “writing to learn and writing to share our learning” (Loane, 2007, p. 211). These narratives would be used again weeks later, when the next stage of building the narrative would occur. Like the building of the field phase, learning about the narrative genre would be an on-going process. TE1 continued, “Then, we can ask the students to keep this piece of writing, and we'll reflect on it in a few weeks' time.” (TE1)

Another aspect of learning about the narrative genre was to introduce the idea of the ‘mixed genre’ and to begin to think about not teaching genre in an overly prescriptive way. Factual and instructional information can also form part of a narrative text. TE1 suggested to not place too many restrictions on the structure of the narrative genre so PSTs could learn about how texts were structured to achieve purposes (Derewianka & Jones, 2016) as she claimed, “Sometimes students and teachers get really confused about having to stick to the rules, not to break them” (TE1).

Similar to the teacher educator storytelling online sessions, the PSTs would be asked to reflect on their work at a later stage. The act of reflecting was not only part of the role of teacher educators through their storytelling but was also built into the PSTs’ assessment task for the unit. Lefstein et al. (2020) contends that “reflective dialogue” is a way of communicating about practice and central to professional learning communities” (p. 2). The development of collaborative practice was key not only to the storytelling for the teacher educators but also as a potential strategy for PSTs as learner teachers.

Supported Writing: Joint Construction

For supported writing, the next stage of the T&L cycle, we discussed ways to support students in identifying the stages of a narrative, assisting them with making choices about the type of story to compose. We decided to engage with a joint construction approach where in each workshop group each of us jointly constructed a narrative with our respective PSTs. Derewianka and Jones (2016) describe joint construction as when “the teacher supports the students through the process of preparing and writing a text in the focus genre... providing them with demonstrations of how to organise their often-spoken information into written language” (p. 53).

TE4 and TE3 began the conversation about workshopping ‘joint construction of text’ with the PSTs:

TE4: Did you do anything on joint construction?

TE3: So, I talked about innovating [on] the story.

TE4: This is great, this is where we can actually do a joint construction with them –

Humphrey and Macnaught (2011) suggest that teacher-led collaborative writing, or joint construction as it is known, can support higher education students’ academic literacy. They believe that creating a space for joint construction in the higher education classroom supports “tertiary students towards independent and creative control of genre” (p. 98). TE3 created the workshop with the intent of assisting PSTs to learn about the language features of

a narrative text. She focused on how stories can be changed while using model texts to mentor the writing process:

I thought we could brainstorm how the story could change. And have a focus on vocabulary. I want to model – jointly writing a story about ‘tap shoes’ as a whole class – then look at the video of ‘The Coat’ and how the teacher actually went about writing it. We could do ours and then look at theirs, that was my idea (TE3).

Working at a meta level, TE2 also suggested going back and revisiting the structure of a genre during the joint construction activity commenting, “Is it worth going back to the genre stuff that you did, TE1 on ‘learning about the genre’, where we talked about plot, setting, and character, refresh that with them in the joint construction?” She explained her thinking behind this recommendation, “Because there was a little bit on language in that. We could explain that this is the sort of language we want you to consider while we’re doing the joint construction” (TE2).

The value in teacher and student collaboration when constructing a text is acknowledged as an effective pedagogical strategy when working with second language learners (Dobinson & Nguyen, 2018). In this case, it not only taught PSTs about the narrative genre and its associated language features but was also a means to scaffold PSTs, especially the international students, toward independent and creative control of the narrative genre.

TE3’s idea was to innovate on the story. First, she suggested brainstorming the content and sequence of the text that would be jointly constructed. Humphrey and Macnaught (2011) contend that “this can be particularly valuable for pre-tertiary and tertiary students who may need assistance with periodicity, i.e., the flow of information, or development of themes within and across paragraphs” (p. 105). The joint construction also involved recapping on the structure of the genre and the type of language used in a narrative text. This phase of the joint construction focused on recycling and reusing information and language that had already been taught. Providing opportunities for language recycling is an effective pedagogical strategy, particularly when working with second language learners (Haig, 2018).

Through our collaborative conversation, like with joint construction, the process and understanding of teaching the PSTs this stage of the T&L cycle developed. We spring boarded off each other’s storytelling to further consider the process of modelling and teaching “joint construction” as a supported writing strategy. Through our exchange, the group were building on and connecting each other’s ideas to mutually construct a collaborative pedagogical strategy.

Conferencing: Working with Students Translating Bilingual Picture Storybooks

In particular, we thought it was important to teach about how the home language of EAL learners could support learning the English required for academic success. The idea was to encourage PSTs to consider supporting students to acquire the cognitive advantages of bi/multilingualism (Cummins, 2000; Turner, 2019).

TE3 shared an example of identifying PST support for writing a bilingual picture storybook. It was decided in the previous workshop to encourage a group of bi/multilingual students to create a picture storybook in their home language and then provide a translation. The PSTs started by illustrating their picture storybook. TE3 encouraged the PSTs to tell their story in a way that blended cultural understandings. However, it became apparent that the process of translating text from one language to another needed some more attention; as the descriptive and emotive language was lost in translation, the narrative became less interesting. TE3 shared:

A group of students in my class are writing a bilingual book. They have written it in Chinese, and then one of the students is translating. He's done like a straight translation. So, some of the story telling and the language that you would use for a narrative and to make it interesting is lost. (TE3)

TE3 conducted a small group writing conference with the PSTs to explain that language choice and meaning making were important when translating text. She described how, “We did have a fairly long conference together, and I explored some of the language with them. They were thinking they had to do a straight translation, so that kind of needed unpacking, which was really good....” TE3 elaborated on how the PSTs “were thinking they had to do a strict translation of the language, rather than how it was going to be read from an English [language] perspective.” The significance of the PSTs gaining an understanding of the importance of language choice and meaning-making when translating text significantly impacted on their narrative work, as TE3 remarked, “Once they understood that, they said we want to do the rest because it was helping them with some of the translation. I’ve just had a read of it. They've done really well with it. I mean, it’s not perfect, but for what they had to do, they had to put so much work into it, I think they’ve done a really great job” (TE3).

Dialogic feedback from a teacher can support student writing and for EAL learners it can enhance the use and knowledge of an additional language. Chen and Nordstrom (2018) write that, “As in all learning, the learning of languages requires feedback that will enhance students’ progress towards becoming a competent language user” (p. 122). TE3 through the writing conference, assisted the PSTs to create a narrative text that was meaningful, and, in turn, the creation of a bilingual picture storybook became a meaningful assessment task in a multitude of ways. Through the sharing of her story TE3 explained how a writing conference with PSTs supported the writing of a bilingual picture storybook. The sharing of this conferencing enhanced our understandings of linguistic pedagogical practices to support the PSTs.

A Shared Vision: Independent Writing with Teacher Support

The following stage of the T&L cycle is independent writing which involves teacher support. The pedagogical strategy of recapping was revisited at various stages in the teaching of the unit of work before introducing the next stage of the T&L cycle. Independent writing was the final stage to be taught to the PSTs. During this stage “students independently write a text on a different topic, related to the field. This may require further research (independently or in small groups) or students may use an aspect of the topic that has been collaboratively researched” (Derewianka & Jones, 2016, p. 63).

TE2 commented on a DET Victoria Literacy Toolkit website (DET, 2022), a pedagogical resource focusing on differentiation in independent writing that could be introduced to the PSTs. She explained how this resource, “emphasises that it’s [independent composition] is an opportunity to differentiate. For some students, you might have a model that they follow. But, for the majority of students, they’ll be writing independently, with teacher support” (TE2).

Dialogic talk is important in the teaching and teaching through the T&L cycle. Derewianka and Jones (2016) discuss how the teacher needs to maximise “opportunities for dialogic talk offered during the many contingent scaffolding opportunities that arise throughout the cycle and as students participate in a range of tasks that vary from teacher-led to collaborative small-group work” (p. 64). TE2 built this idea of “contingent scaffolding” into the workshop when introducing the idea of editing and proofreading. She explained this form of scaffolding to the other teacher educators: “Introducing the idea of editing versus

proofreading – that is the choices that we make, as authors, as opposed to the accuracy of the secretarial features.”

Other opportunities for dialogic talk, TE2 found, centred on the features of narrative genre that PSTs would be required to teach students. TE2 described how PSTs were challenged by the notion of ‘theme’: “I was finding, when I was talking to students, they were giving me these long-winded explanations, but they couldn’t quite describe what the theme was.”

TE2 provided a pedagogical dialogical strategy for supporting PSTs with identifying themes. She shared this with the tutors:

And then, to look at their own texts and look at their theme. Can they identify their orientation, complication and resolution? And, if relevant, what language features do they use? So, for the language features – I was thinking along the lines of – when they go to proofread, have they consistently written in the second, third-person, present, past tense? Those sorts of things. And then, what gaps do they see? Is there anything that they need to change, to make the story more cohesive? And then, doing the same thing, but with a partner group, so they’re getting some peer feedback (TE2).

Our knowledge of the T&L cycle developed as we shared our ideas through storytelling, and by so doing planning workshop activities. We engaged with designed-in scaffolding skills (Derewianka & Jones, 2016) as we selected texts, identified student need (and in particular the needs of second language learners), designed and adapted workshops in addition to selecting and sequencing activities and grouping PSTs.

TE2 framed the practice of independent writing for us providing us with a pedagogical approach that assisted with teaching this stage of the T&L cycle. She shared her knowledge how to teach independent writing, so we all grew in our teaching practice. The collaborative storytelling was sustained over a series of online meetings and like with Shank’s (2006) research “was essential for framing a shared vision for pedagogical practice” (p. 720).

Post-Teaching Reflection

After completing this unit of work, we reflected in an online meeting on the use of the meta-level and collaborative style of teaching throughout the first-year unit. We had worked with a diverse cohort of PSTs, and for the international student cohort we had limited insight into their prior learning, just as the international students had limited prior knowledge of the expectations of language and literacy teaching within an Australian context. TE4 reflected on assumptions we make as teachers about what students bring to the learning situation and how they learn,

I always tell my PSTs, “Don’t make assumptions about students’ learning”. But I think that maybe it’s interesting because I think that maybe I do. What I was assuming with part of this project is that through my own modelling, students would then be able to think about how that would apply in a classroom context.

In the end, TE4 questioned how PSTs transfer their new knowledge about teaching practices to their own teaching, and commented that as teacher educators we could have communicated more explicitly how we had planned our teaching,

So, it’s the meta level of work again which we modelled by taking it in turns to complete workshops and the curriculum plan and the reflective journal, but maybe we needed to make it explicit how we went about that. (TE4)

TE3 responded that she shared the learnings of the weekly online meetings with the PSTs in her workshops:

It was interesting because I used to talk to them each week, I'd go, "So during our weekly meeting this week, we discussed da-da-da-da-, and this is what we're going to do." (TE3)

The weekly online conversations were a high point of the teaching of the unit. They assisted us with developing an individual and collective confidence for teaching the T&L cycle. TE3 noted, "but definitely, at those weekly meetings, they were great. I think for the cohesiveness of this team, and everybody getting the confidence around doing this task". TE1 replied, "Yeah, I would think about weekly meetings for all my units now." TE2 joined in and said, "I felt prepared each week. I was like, 'Oh yeah, I know what I'm doing somebody's talked through it with me... Oh yeah, I've missed that bit'".

For TE3 the collaborative weekly discussions provided "light bulb moments, oh I misinterpreted" because the discussions allowed us to be more cohesive in how this unit was taught. TE4 commented that she "found it a much more stimulating way of working". She went on to say, "It wasn't just working on your own, preparing a workshop. Somebody said, 'Oh, I've got this and that would be good in there and we can put this on Moodle'. It was a real sharing of resources and ideas." And for the teacher educators there was a sense of "ownership" of the unit because, as TE3 noted: "You could contribute content to the unit as a whole. It wasn't kind of someone just saying, 'Here it is', but at a more meta-level you could put your ideas in." Our collaborative discussion and reflections contributed to a collaborative culture that reflected personal and professional relationships (Richards, 1999).

By gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of "what" we do as teacher educators, our teaching practice, we believe, was strengthened. TE2 maintained that the team meetings not only developed our pedagogy and content knowledge about the T&L cycle but also through our dialogue we constructed understandings together as teachers of language, literacy and learning. She commented on the self-assuredness that came from our collaborative dialogue: "I certainly feel extremely competent now in my ability to talk about the teaching-learning cycle. Like, I've known it for a long time, but I guess the intricacies of it, I'm like yep, I feel really confident in being able to talk about it and workshop it with students".

Teacher educator decision-making is often hidden, made elsewhere and not visible in observation of teaching practice. Through our dialogue, different aspects of our teaching came into view. We began to consider who was responsible at different stages during the teaching of a unit of work, that is, us as teachers or the PSTs. Our work at a meta-level, reflected in our storytelling, made some of the work of language and literacy teachers visible to ourselves and our PSTs, as well as, as TE4 points out, identified opportunities to develop and make the pedagogical knowledge more explicit in the future.

A recommendation for future teaching would be to model this process and record and share the benefits of this pedagogical approach. Our storytelling led to an organic teaching process. It involved a culture of risk-taking and trust in the group that opened forums for critical reflection to analyse our teaching by making connections with each other's educational ideas and practice. The verbal exchanges put our ideas and practices in a group space for consideration.

Conclusion: Making Visible Teaching Practice

This paper has made accessible the unique perspectives and individual, as well as shared, understandings of four teacher educators as they enact practice. The manuscript itself is a form of storytelling that records our professional learning experience. The strength in the storytelling methodology is that it provided a means to work with online zoom conversations to reveal the collective thinking and discussion that sits behind the pedagogical practices, including modelling and joint construction practices of us, as teacher educators.

By sharing our collaborative work and reflections we aim to stimulate and inspire dialogue between language and literacy educators. In this paper, we have discussed the purpose and consequences of our teaching and how we came to understand our individual and collaborative learning journeys as teacher educators. Our storytelling explored the thinking behind the choices we made about how to teach and teach about the T&L cycle and narrative genre. This idea of sharing the thinking behind our teaching practice has implications for how to teach and learn about pedagogical models such as the T&L cycle.

The research raises important questions regarding the assumptions we make as teacher educators about our role in the teaching and learning process. We asked at the beginning of this paper how we could support and encourage PSTs to apply and adapt this pedagogical knowledge to their own teaching context. While this study does not suggest that this is the only way to teach the subject English education in teacher education courses it makes the point that working collaboratively and sharing stories can help us make our teaching practices visible to PSTs and support us as learners on our journey of becoming teacher educators. TE4 summed up our experience as “We learned each week” and each of us “was building on [our own] understanding”. By developing an understanding of our subject area and ourselves as teacher educators, we cultivated a professional collaborative discussion and practice that we can take into the future.

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Appendix

Assessment Task 2

Part A: Curriculum Plan (50%)

In a small group, collaboratively design a curriculum plan based on the teaching-learning cycle. The plan will involve scaffolding primary students as they create a story picture book. As part of the design process, your group will compose your own story picture book so that you can experience what is involved and you will have a model (both of the process and the product) to share with the primary students.

As part of the inquiry project, you will be keeping a reflective journal to document your learning as you develop your curriculum plan, compose your story picture book and undertake reading.

The curriculum plan should span around 4–6 weeks. It should be aimed at learners in middle - upper primary, taking into consideration the needs of diverse learners.

It will involve such aspects as:

- familiarising students with the nature of story picture books (e.g. their diversity, their history, their different modes of production)
- selecting and reading several picture books with the students (using such activities as modelled, shared, guided and independent reading)
- deconstructing (with the students) the story picture book that your group has created as a model for the students' own story picture book (e.g. modelling the composing process, features of a good story, how the story is organised, how the characters are developed, depiction of the setting, the interplay between image and language, some key language features)
- jointly constructing with the students' elements of their own story picture book

The main focus of the inquiry project is on the process of designing the curriculum plan (including your model story picture book) and your reflections on the learning you have gained through the process (as documented in your reflective journal).