

Independent Writing

Edited transcript of Narelle leading discussion about the thinking behind preparing a workshop for pre-service teachers on ‘Independent Writing’.

Narelle: So, I was having a look back at emails and, Anne, you’ve mentioned that the students were having trouble differentiating between a lesson plan and a curriculum plan.

Anne: Yes, the confusion is that other units the students are taking are teaching them to prepare lesson plans.

Narelle: So, I thought with – starting off with a recap of where curriculum plan fits into the idea of planning.

Anne: Oh, fantastic.

Narelle: So, the lesson plan is the close-up, that looks at how and why in more detail, and the curriculum plan is an overview of a topic. You might list the general activities that you’re doing, and some assessment detail, but you’re not going into that fine detail. I’ve had a lot of questions about timing and the instructions that you need to give to students. I’m like, ‘No, no. Just what we’ve been doing each week’. Is there anything on the curriculum plan that you would like me to add, in terms of – because, they don’t have to do links to the Victorian curriculum, do they?

Anne: No, we decided against that because it added another layer which we thought would be confusing.

ANNE: Yep. A few of them have gone to the Victorian curriculum to work out what year level would be appropriate. But I’ve said to them, ‘You don’t need to include the detail’.

Anne: Yeah. It’s a bit like teaching the language aspects of the narrative genre. It’s there in the workshops but we’re not focusing in on it.

Narelle: This slide in Bev’s book, she has a ... has a list of different activities you can do, and then she asks students to work out whether or not – which part of the curriculum and teaching cycle and learning cycle they’re from.

Anne: Oh, that’s great

Narelle: Yeah. So, I’ve adapted it as an activity we can do with students ‘what might be something you might do in Build the Field? What might be something you might do in the different areas?’ My question is whether the different activities she’s got covers a range of genres. Did you want me to adapt them so they’re all narrative,

so they could use them for their curriculum plan? Or, did you want me to leave them as the different genres, and they can tweak them for their curriculum plan?

Anne: I think it would be better narrative. Also, I think we need to talk about the meta-level – that this is our thinking as teachers, and this isn't an activity we would give to students.

Kelly: Although, you might give them something like this around a narrative and get them to actually match the structure of a narrative.

Narelle: Yes, it might be about learning about the genre and I think one of the activities is actually a cut and paste thing, and put it back together, which is a similar kind of activity.

Anne: Yeah. So, delegate, to us, bits of it, if you need some help.

Narelle: Yeah. I think all I need to do is go in and, where it says, "Persuasive text," change it to, "Narrative text." So, most of those seem to work. And, there are a few narrative ones already in there, but I'll let you know.

Anne: So, will that be hard copy, or will it be an online activity?

Narelle: Could probably do it as hard copy. I've got it as Word, where they could lift it up in Moodle and go in and put in their responses. So, that might be a way to save photocopying, and stuff.

Anne: Yes, that sounds great.

Narelle: Cool. So, I'll put the online link in there for the Word doc, when I've posted it. Cool.

Anne: So, that's a nice recap activity.

Narelle: Yeah. That's what I thought. I'm just going to move the cycle, because that's all context.

Anne: I feel they're just starting to get it now.

Narelle: Yeah.

Kelly: It all seems to be coming together.

Narelle: Then we'll do a recap of the teaching and learning cycle, again. Then I found, on the literacy toolkit website a description of independent composition, which I thought was quite nice. It emphasises that it's 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.

Anne: Great.

Narelle: Then, introducing the idea of the editing versus proofreading – the choices that we make, as authors, as opposed to the accuracy of the secretarial features. I've got animation on this. So, to ask them to recap, "What are the features of narrative genre?" Because, that's what they will be teaching their students. And then, to go into, 'Well, let's go back over your stories and use this as an opportunity to let's have a look at them.' 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. 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.

Anne: I like it because it's not introducing new stuff – it's recapping and refocusing what we've done before.

Narelle: Yeah, when I was reading all the stuff about independent writing, it was basically, 'Okay, now, students take and apply what they know'. It's like if they're doing that, there's no new stuff that I really need to introduce. I thought it would be a good opportunity – some of them have worked so hard on their stories. It would be a good opportunity for them to share them with a different audience, as well. But, also, talking about the importance – when you get students to do peer review – that you give them a structure to do it. It's not just a read, give feedback, because that often doesn't work.

Kelly: So, are you meaning that you just want them to do sharing as a group, or as a whole?

Narelle: Swapping – so, find another group and swap.

Kelly: Right, okay.

Narelle: So, two or three groups swap stories. And then, a similar thing, for reviewing the characters and the setting. So, these questions that we use to prompt them to think about the characters – and, again, referring back to 'the coat' – how 'the coat' built character description. And getting them to think about how their characters developed. I wanted to give them two different ways of doing this. So, the general question but also, then to talk about –students sometimes need a bit more guidance, and to give them a character development map, where they reverse-engineer their characters. So, rather than planning their characters, they look at what evidence they've built into the text, to develop their characters.

Anne: Oh, that's nice. That's a nice strategy.

Narelle: I thought, the character development map that I had floating around – they can use it with their students to plan. But they can also use it in texts where they're doing analysis of text, or for their own stories, as well. It's a handy one to have. And,

again, some prompting questions about the characters – to look at that. Moving into the setting. So, it's using all the stuff that we've done before, but getting them to explore it, in terms of their text, before moving into proofreading. And, I thought it would be interesting to get the classes to actually think about – what strategies do they use, to proofread? And, get a collection from the whole group, because I got a sense, when we talked about this briefly, last week – a lot of them do a quick, cursory read, rather than a deliberate proofreading strategy. So, I thought that would be interesting, to work out what they see as proofreading, and what they actually do, and how they've been taught to proofread.

Kelly: Some of them just do a spellcheck <Laughs>

Narelle: <Laughs> Yeah, which is useful, except it doesn't pick up words that are misused.

Anne: Yeah, also I encourage students to swap with a peer and proofread each other's writing.

Kelly: Yeah. That's what I do.

Anne: And also, read out loud. Reading it out loud really helps with checking for meaning and coherence.

Kelly: I think that's really important for the EAL students, as well, because they particularly miss a lot of the 'the' and the 'as'. And so, by reading it out loud, it's very helpful.

Narelle: The other thing that – I can't remember who taught me this – was to read each sentence backwards. Not each sentence backwards. But, start with your last sentence first, so you disrupt the flow, so you're not making those automatic connections yourself. So, you're looking at it at a detailed sentence level.

Anne: Oh, that's a nice idea.

Karina: Sorry, can you explain that again Narelle?

Narelle: So, if we're looking at – I'll just go back a slide. If this was a paragraph, rather than starting at the top, you'd start at the bottom and look at, 'How significant is the setting to the storyline?' You might even start with, 'For example, if you change the setting, how else does your setting change? How significant is the setting to the storyline? How do these sentences change as the story develops?' So, it forces you to read more slowly and specifically at the sentence level because often we add the words in that we've missed.

Kelly: That's brilliant. I haven't heard of that before.

Narelle: Yeah. If you know that it's at the sentence level that you struggle in terms of your writing, it's a helpful tool to have up your sleeve. When I say reading backwards, it does need some explanation. <Laughs>

So, that's probably all the content stuff, because it's independent writing. From what I read, it's a recap of what they've done. And then, they go and write. So, that's where I've put in the feedback. I need to put these links online. It's a Google Docs form which collates all their responses for us from the survey. And then, they can write as much as they like for the last question.

Anne: I thought it would be really useful for us. This leads nicely into evaluation and assessment. We will have modelled a form of formative assessment.

Narelle: And, I put into my reflection. My reflection is quite long because I put in a bit about the teachers using feedback, as well, to shape their teaching. So, it's not just about, 'You have the plan and you teach that'. You need to adapt and be flexible, as well. I took some of the stuff from Halliday, and also, this week's reading, which was the Halliday piece. I also have some other references there about supporting student writing.

Kelly: I think we need to go back and visit supported reading a little bit more. I know, when they were trying to fill it in on their unit plan, my group struggled a little bit more with that section. They were asking for some more information.

Narelle: So, is it worth me putting some stuff in about supported reading this week?

Anne: Maybe we could recap on that the week after because we've got quite a lot in this week, already.

Narelle: Yep.

Kelly: Yes. I had lots of questions this week about supported reading and I talked about some of the things we'd done. But because it wasn't as explicit – we need to go back and revisit it...

Narelle: Cool. One thing for this week was there wasn't really any videos on independent writing. I don't know whether you want some video content in there.

Kelly: I wonder if we have anything on independent writing where we have the teacher guiding and scaffolding one group, in particular.

Narelle: There was, last week. In the Karina's workshop, a video where a teacher was working with her students.

Kelly: There's actually three videos on that page, and I seem to remember the last one being more focused towards independent writing. The Education Department page on the teaching and learning cycle. I'm fairly certain one was more related to independent writing.

Anne: I think it does help bring it to real life, when they see teachers enacting it in classrooms with students.

Narelle: Yep. And, I wasn't sure where to put this in, but I wanted to make the point that we've been doing independent writing with them each week, because we've done stuff, and then, we've gone, "Okay, off you go."

Anne: Could that go in the reflection?

Narelle: Yeah, okay.

Anne: Or, in the curriculum plan.

Narelle: That makes sense. I'll put a note in there.

Anne: So, for the curriculum plan, I've been collating it. Last week, I put it up online as a collated doc. I edited it back a bit, and the students picked up that they need to be more specific in their curriculum plan, as to the specific activities they're doing. I didn't name the videos we used - Spiderman and 'The Mask' because I thought it can confuse them and some of them think they need to be doing Spiderman. It's more that they can draw on the idea. What do you think? Are they past the stage of being confused now, or –

Narelle: I think most of mine are.