How to read this book

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This is not a ‘how-to’ book. The following pages are not filled with tips and tricks about how to best teach language and literacy. We believe that the work of language and literacy educators is deeply embedded within the school communities where they are teaching: what works in one setting might not work in another; what works with one child (e.g. drilling and skillling in phonics) might not be appropriate for another child. Language and literacy are complex, as we shall affirm repeatedly in the following chapters, and we are very sceptical of anyone who claims to have found the best method to teach reading, writing or any other dimension of a child’s growth as a literate human being, given the unique contexts in which teachers work.

Nor does this book pretend to give you ‘all-you-ever-needed-to-know’ about language and literacy. Throughout the book you will find references to current research, and sometimes you will be given summary accounts of what that research has found, such as the discussion of Shirley Brice Heath’s work in Chapter 2. Several other chapters use the work of researchers such as Luis Moll and Pat Thomson. But by and large, what we have chosen to do is to point you in the direction of research that you might like to follow up, rather than giving you potted versions of what researchers are saying.

What this book aims to do is to support you in your efforts to think critically about your work as a language and literacy educator. In the following chapters you will find plenty of examples of how to investigate, reflect on and better understand your teaching of language and literacy. This is to enable you to become a professional who not only responds to but shapes decisions relating to policy and practice within your school community. Chapter 3, for example, argues the desirability of professional learning that is ongoing, collaborative and embedded in the day-to-day work of teachers. This is also to suppose that you are engaging in ongoing professional reading that enables you to think about your practice differently.

Continuing reading
Teachers who are reflective practitioners can never be fully satisfied with second-hand accounts of current research. No doubt it is difficult for busy classroom teachers to find time to do independent reading. You would certainly find it hard to work through (say) Shirley Brice Heath’s Ways with Words (1983/1994) after a long day at school, but it is still important to maintain a reading habit of some kind in order to engage critically in your work as a language and literacy educator.

Unfortunately, much of the material about instruction on Departmental websites (e.g. the information about the E5 instructional model on the Victorian Education website or about C2C in Queensland) has the character of ‘truths’ being delivered through a funnel, to use a metaphor that Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (1995, pp. 7–8) employ to characterise the way knowledge is typically passed on to teachers by experts and other authorities, without any recognition of the knowledge that
teachers themselves have developed both through their independent reading and (crucially) through their ongoing interactions with children. Curiously enough, such formulae are also abstracted from the research that might underpin them. Stripped of their ‘inquiry origins’ (to borrow again from Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, p. 8), they are reduced to the level of glossy logos or advertising slogans, as though teachers should not be concerned about whether they have any validity. Although it is difficult for a teacher to find the time to read, we are nonetheless thinking of you as someone who does not simply accept what you are told but as someone who continually seeks to maintain a critical perspective on your professional practice by engaging in independent professional reading as a component of your professional learning.

Such reading is important, not only as a source of information about teaching strategies that might be effective, but as a way of re-envisioning your practice as a language and literacy teacher. Reading can open up dimensions of your professional practice that you have not seen or thought about before (to which you have been ‘blind’, as we shall explain in Chapter 2). Brice Heath’s study does not translate directly into strategies that you might use to engage socially disadvantaged students in their learning. What it does is sensitise you to the values and beliefs that shape your work as a teacher, encouraging you to learn more about your students, including getting to know what they believe and value, in order to establish a supportive and productive dialogue with them. Many of the researchers who you might follow as part of your professional reading have spent many years teaching in classrooms. By reading their work you are displaying respect and intellectual generosity towards their approach to language and literacy, with a view to seeing whether their experiences might provide a perspective on your own professional practice. In becoming a teacher of language and literacy you are joining a huge conversation in which teachers and researchers from around the world are engaged, sharing their experiences and trying to learn from one another.

Teachers of language and literacy in Australia can gain access to this conversation by becoming members of the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA) or the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) (or by joining both). The former has traditionally catered for primary educators, while the latter tends to focus on the work of secondary English teachers. Both professional associations publish highly respected journals, namely The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy (ALEA) and English in Australia (AATE). Language and Literacy teachers in other countries belong to similar subject associations in order to be part of a larger professional network that sustains their continuing professional learning and professional commitment.
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Reading about the work of other teachers enables you to engage in issues beyond your own immediate experience and context. This book features the work of many experienced teachers as they grapple with questions that have emerged for them in the course of their day-to-day practice. These teachers may be able to exercise more professional autonomy than early career teachers, who are typically on contract. The initiatives they take may therefore appear to be outside your realm of possibilities at the current moment. Yet even teachers in ongoing positions continue to grapple with institutional constraints that sometimes conflict with their professional knowledge and beliefs. The chapters in this book show them negotiating the complexities of their professional practice within their particular institutional settings, always with the interests of their students at the forefront of their minds, and thus we hope that their stories will be instructive for you. In response to reading the following accounts of their practice, we hope that you can make informed choices about your own professional practice as you pursue your career.

Reflection and discussion

When early career teachers are asked to recall the parts of their initial teacher education programs that were most effective, they almost invariably nominate their teaching experience or fieldwork as having provided them with the practical experience they needed in order to begin operating in a classroom. This is understandable – it is, after all, vital that you gain experience in negotiating the social relationships that comprise any classroom, learning how to manage children’s expectations and gradually developing a wisdom of practice that enables you to handle situations as they emerge. But far from developing ‘naturally’, such wisdom is the product of continually reflecting on your practice in an effort to understand the complexities of teaching and learning. Early career teachers, in fact, often nominate as the other most valuable part of their initial teacher education programs the fact that they were taught how to be reflective and to learn from their experiences. This is where reading (or ‘theory’) becomes very important, because it provides you with concepts and a language – ‘curriculum’, ‘pedagogy’, ‘assessment’, ‘evaluation’, to name the most obvious – that allow you to begin to make sense of the complexities of the social world of the classroom.

How has your reading helped you to understand your experiences as a teacher? Can you think of a book or an idea that gave you particularly compelling insights into the complexities of your professional practice? What, in your view, is the relationship between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’?

These observations derive from a major research project in which researchers at Deakin University have been involved, namely Studying the Effectiveness of Teacher Education (SETE), a longitudinal study that surveyed early career teachers about their initial teacher education programs and their experiences in schools.
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For details about SETE see <http://www.setearc.com.au>. See also Allard and Doecke (2014) for an account of the experiences of one group of early career teachers who were interviewed for this project.

Reading stories

Our recognition of the importance of practice is shown by the stories that comprise much of this volume. All are stories about teachers grappling with the challenges they face in their teaching and the kinds of initiatives they take in order to support their students’ language and learning. These stories provide examples of the work of committed language and literacy educators, without any of them pretending to be a model of best practice. Rather than being illustrative of best practice, they show teachers working within their school communities, drawing on the knowledge and experience available to them in order to enhance the educational opportunities of their students. Some teachers have told their own stories (see especially Rachael MacGilp’s account of her work in Chapter 2). Others take the form of cases constructed by the authors of the chapters on the basis of interviews with teachers with whom they have worked.

Some of these cases are examples of what Timothy Hopper, Kathy Sanford and Sarah Bonsoor-Kurki (2012) call ‘a creative non-fiction ethnographic genre’, whereby the researchers ‘tell a story on behalf of participants by creating representative characters and replacing names and places to protect anonymity. The focus of this genre is to engage the reader’s emotions using a dramatization of real events that are spliced together to create a believable account. We should also add that in exercising this kind of creative licence the authors attempt to respect the voice and perspective of teachers and to foreground the complexity of the situations in which they work.

When reading these stories you are not being invited to agree with the rationales that the teachers give for their actions, as though each story contains a lesson that can directly be applied to your own situation. You should feel free to critically (but respectfully) interrogate what these teachers say and do and to consider the applicability of their initiatives to your own situation.

Along with our scepticism of pedagogical bandwagons that herald the best way to teach literacy, we are also sceptical of claims by people that they are able to make judgments about quality teaching, as though it is all about an individual teacher’s performance, without regard to the social relationships and school contexts in which teachers operate, or the infrastructure that underpins any teacher’s work. This issue
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is emerging with increasing frequency as governments try to introduce initiatives such as performance pay, turning a blind eye to the fact that teachers are crucially dependent on each other when it comes to implementing curriculum and pedagogy responsive to the needs of the children with whom they are working.

All the teachers whose professional practice is represented in this volume would say that working collaboratively with colleagues is one of the most rewarding aspects of their professional lives (all the stories reflect this kind of professional stance, but you could look at Chapter 6 and Chapter 8 for especially compelling examples of collaborative practice). Along with a disposition to continually reflect on their professional practice (or what Alan Reid [2004] calls an ‘inquiry stance’), they would say that a vital dimension of their work is a capacity to collaborate with colleagues, sharing experiences and learning from and with them. That is why they have been generous enough to open up their classroom doors, letting us observe and talk with them about what they are doing. Teaching is at its heart collaborative work, and any attempt to improve the quality of teaching in schools must likewise be collaborative in nature, rather than ‘obsessing’, as Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves (2012) have argued, about ‘celebrating the stars and dismissing the duds’.

Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves (2012) suggest there is a ‘need to concentrate on moving the entire profession forward instead of obsessing about the extremes in the field by celebrating the stars and dismissing the duds.’

You will find that each story is usually accompanied by prompts that invite you to reflect critically on what you have read. As we have just said, you are not being asked to agree with what the teachers say about their work. You may reach a judgement, for example, that the initiative being described is simply not one that would work in your setting. But whatever judgement you make, you should try to express it in a provisional way. Language and literacy teaching is far too complex to lend itself to simplistic comments about whether any example of teaching is good or bad. Ultimately, you might sense an ideological difference between your stance and that of the teachers whose voices you hear in this volume, but such a judgment should always foreground the deeply situated nature of teaching, and the fact that the circumstances being described are specific to the teacher concerned and the context in which they work.

What occurs in classrooms is always subject to interpretation. There are at least as many versions of what occurs in a classroom as there are people within it. What you need to do when engaging with the stories in this book is to read them reflexively, trying to be mindful of the values and beliefs that might be shaping your own reaction to the people and incidents described, rather than making a
how and fast judgement about the example of professional practice that has been presented to you.

See Brenton Doecke (2013) and Brenton Doecke and Douglas McClenaghan (2011) for arguments about the need for educators to reflexively engage in their professional practice.

The teachers you read about are themselves acting reflexively, critically monitoring the initiatives they are taking. Chapter 4 provides a good example of teachers working reflexively when negotiating curriculum changes in their school, specifically with respect to the need to develop their practice with emerging technologies.

Debating literacy

Another reason why this is not a ‘how to’ book is that all aspects of language and literacy education have unfortunately been politicised. Just about every week in the media, you’ll find someone lamenting declining literacy standards and blaming it all on teachers. ‘Back to the basics’, ‘Direct instruction’, ‘Explicit teaching’, ‘Explicit learning’ – quick-fix solutions abound in public debates about education, and it is necessary, as a professional, to step back from such claims and quietly insist that there are no easy remedies or instructional manuals that match the complexity of what you do.

In becoming a teacher of language and literacy, you are doing something far more complicated than learning how to drive a car or operate a computer, activities for which instructional manuals may very well be useful. As we have just stated, what you are doing requires a disposition to continually reflect on your teaching, to ‘gladly learn and teach’ (to borrow a famous line from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*). This involves cultivating an ability to recognise the difference between what you set out to achieve in a lesson and what you actually accomplish. There is always a difference between teaching and learning. One does not simply fold into the other, as in simplistic talk about so-called ‘explicit’ teaching leading to ‘explicit’ learning. Classrooms are places where people interact with one another, each bringing something unique to the exchanges that occur there. They are not places where you can apply a ‘means-end’ mentality, as though a set of inputs will necessarily produce the required outputs.

Far from being a bad thing, this is a condition for rich learning to occur. As Douglas Barnes, a famous English educator, has written about the planning teachers do in advance of instruction:
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Douglas Barnes’s book, *From Communication to Curriculum*, was originally published in 1975, but you may still find it worthwhile to familiarise yourself with Barnes’s work and the key concepts that underpin it, especially these days when a problematical notion of teaching as simply transmission of knowledge to pupils, as though they can be treated as empty vessels to be filled, is once again becoming influential. For a similar understanding of the interactive nature of classroom exchanges, you might also find it worthwhile to read Garth Boomer’s (1992) ideas about negotiating the curriculum.

When people talk about ‘the school curriculum’ they often mean ‘what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn’. But a curriculum made only of a teacher’s intentions would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much. To become meaningful, a curriculum has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers, all of whom have their private lives outside school. By ‘enact’ I mean come together in a meaningful communication – talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry with one another, learn what to say and do, and how to interpret what others say and do. A curriculum as soon as it becomes more than intentions is embodied in the communicative life of an institution, the talk and gestures by which pupils and teachers exchange meanings even when they quarrel or cannot agree. In this sense curriculum is a form of communication. (Douglas Barnes 1992, p. 14)

Barnes’s description of classroom exchanges gets close, we think, to capturing the complexities of teaching and learning and the professional learning that can occur when teachers reflect on the difference between the intended and the enacted curriculum. Yet, you can hardly detect a trace of those complexities whenever newspapers or television current affairs shows feature debates about literacy and schooling. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion about literacy, often drawing on their own experience of schooling, as though that somehow gives them authority to say whatever they like and impose their views on the entire profession. Politicians and the media are not slow to voice their opinions about the best way to teach reading or writing. You should always ask whether their opinions reflect any substantial knowledge of research on language and literacy.

**Reflection and discussion**

How do you feel about the way literacy issues are reported in the popular media? Do you feel that the reporting is always accurate? Why is literacy such a hotly debated topic? What, from your reading of newspapers and other popular media, do people appear to think learning to read or write is all about? How does what they say compare with your knowledge of current research? What do they understand by the word ‘literacy’? How does this compare with your own understanding of this word? What, as a teacher, do you think you might be able to do in order to show to people outside the profession the complexities of the work you do?
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Affirming your professional knowledge

A few years ago groups of primary literacy educators and secondary English teachers came together under the auspices of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) and the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA) to discuss the knowledge and values that unite them as a profession. The project eventually became known as the STELLA project (i.e. Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia), involving the development of a website that comprises statements and stories about the complexities of English teaching.

This was in an effort to show what AD Hope, the famous poet and critic, had said many years before, namely that for English teachers to truly be a profession, they needed to be ‘recognised in the community as the body responsible for expert advice and for saying what ought and ought not to be done by those who administer education in this country’. (Hope, 1967, p. 5)

Given the number of regulatory authorities, such as the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), and the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) that have been set up over the past decade, it is a moot point as to whether literacy educators in this country have improved their professional status since Hope gave the address from which we have taken his statement about professionalism.

Rather than trusting teachers as possessing the authority of knowledge and experience to advise governments as to ‘what ought and ought not to be done’ when it comes to providing all students in Australian schools with rich learning experiences, teachers are increasingly being told what to do by outside authorities who are operating at a remove from the specific school communities in which teachers are working. This is a disturbing trend that is also evident in other parts of the world, as Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves (2012) make plain.

Yet the STELLA website remains a valuable resource for teachers’ stories and other texts about language and literacy teaching, and you would find it worthwhile to visit the website, not least because of the statements these teachers developed about the language modes: listening, speaking, writing and reading. The opening sentence of the ‘listening and speaking’, for example, goes like this:

**For accomplished teachers, talk is at the centre of English curriculum and pedagogy.**

Their classrooms are rich linguistic communities in which all students participate. They give focused attention to various aspects of listening and speaking, teaching their students to listen actively and to share their ideas and experiences. Crucial in this respect...
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is the establishment of a classroom environment that supports productive interaction between students in both small group situations and whole class activities. Accomplished teachers know how to structure such activities so that their students are able to jointly construct knowledge through talk.

This attempt by a group of language and literacy educators to conceptualise classrooms as spaces for social interaction reflects the same standpoint as the statement by Douglas Barnes that we have already quoted. Along with the other statements about the language modes on the STELLA website, these teachers are acknowledging the agency of students as they come together to engage in communication within classroom settings.

You will find that this recognition of the way students actively participate in classrooms is also a feature of the chapters that follow. Indeed, Chapter 9 focuses specifically on how to ensure that students have agency rather than allowing classroom interactions to be structured predominantly by a hierarchical relationship between the teacher and his or her pupils. This chapter investigates teacher engagement with students’ funds of knowledge through classroom-based research and pedagogies that help promote student agency and collaboration in literacy learning. The authors of Chapter 7 have used the concept of funds of knowledge to conceptualise the out of school spaces where students are learning literacy.

But, as we have indicated, time has marched on since the first decade of the 21st century when the teachers originally involved in the STELLA project came together to share their experiences and write stories about their work. Nowadays, when language and literacy educators talk about their teaching, they are obliged to grapple with the effect that standardised testing (such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN]) is having on their work, as well as the way their teaching is viewed by regulatory authorities such as AITSL.

The following statement by a state primary school teacher in the northern suburbs of Melbourne – let’s call her ‘May’ – conveys some of the tensions that she is experiencing, as she tries to implement a writing program in her school. She is contrasting the assumptions about writing that appear to underpin the standardised literacy tests that her students are obliged to do, when the whole school goes through the NAPLAN ritual, with the kinds of writing her children produce in the course of the year:

The following quotation is taken from Brenton Doecke, Alex Kostogriz and Bella Illesca (2010). This essay is based on interviews that took place as part of a research project on...