

"For Sale": Community Brochures for New Kids

By Tazmin Manji

The Neighboring Community

Located on the outskirts of Vancouver's central urban area, the school in which I teach is approximately one hour away from the hub of downtown Vancouver. In spite of the geographical distance, this rural community reflects many similar characteristics of any urban community within the Lower Mainland of British Columbia: It is highly culturally diverse and it is developing rapidly, with schools and neighborhoods in a constant state of new development.

My Classroom Makeup

The eighteen students that make-up my split grade one/two class come from two-parent families. Socio-economically, these families range from middle-class to affluent. Five out of eighteen children (of Korean descent), have English-speaking fathers who work in the Asia-Pacific market and therefore travel between Asia and Vancouver quite frequently. Parents of the thirteen remaining children are employed either in the business sector, education, or fine arts. Culturally, of these thirteen children, one child is of East Indian descent; another child is of Caribbean and Caucasian descent; another is of Spanish descent (she is also beginning to learn English); another child is of Filipino descent; two children are of Korean descent (one of whom is an English Language Learner); another child is of Russian descent; and those remaining are of Caucasian descent.

Broadening my Community Experiences

As I began my attempts to learn of the literacy practices in the community, I noticed how this residential neighborhood was complimented by its close proximity to coffee shops, bus stops, markets, insurance agencies, and dental/medical offices. In addition, mega-size stores (Home Depot, Staples, The Brick, Super Store, Wal-Mart, Save-On-Foods, Costco) were adjacent to the neighborhood, and ethnically diverse restaurants, (fast food, diners, and fine-dining places) were equally accessible by bus routes or private transportation as were the local library and shopping malls. It was incredible at just how much environmental print my students and their families were surrounded by!

In efforts to broaden this encounter with the community, I decided to spend some time being actively engaged in it. I had coffee at Starbucks (noting the menus for coffee and the print on the labels for food offerings) and visited the library. I also took photos of how literacy was present and abundant in the community. For example, an elaborate message board was present in the pediatric dentistry office in the neighborhood.

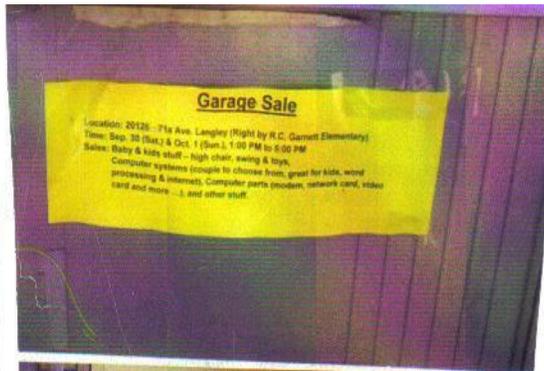


I felt that it was now time to invite my students for a "Literacy Hunt." I explained that I would bring my camera along so we could take some pictures. Their excitement was clearly evident as we moved to writing a class permission form for our first field trip! This, of course, constituted an authentic literacy activity with a real life text (permission form) for a real life purpose (to obtain permission from parents to go on the field trip).

Dear family's, will
you give your child
permission to go on
this walk around the
naber hood. If you
can tell us we will
be happy!

As we ventured off on our walk, students immediately started reading the first texts they saw, *For Sale* and *Sold*. I could not believe how many realtor signs were posted in this area! Other texts included addresses, signs within the schools, mailboxes, and print written on the sidewalk (e.g., *B.C. Hydro*). As we walked further, the excitement grew as they began to point out logo signs such as Mac's, Starbucks, T.D. Canada Trust, Ralph's Market, Esso, Tim Horton's, Subway, and

Alpha Courses (from a Christian Church). We also saw several signs for lost pets and garage sales



Because these texts contained more print, students were much more engaged and curious about the information. In fact, one of my male students, who reads at grade level but is quite often reluctant to read, took great pride in reading these texts to the class! This was truly an important event for him.

As mentioned earlier, I was mystified at the number of realtor signs, so I thought it would be a good idea to use these texts as a numeracy assessment. More specifically, I was curious to know if my students could “see” math in the real world. To investigate, I posed the question, “Does anyone see any math in the neighborhood?”

“No” was all I heard. Thinking that their perception of math may be limited to number problems, I decided to probe a bit further by asking a more specific question. I asked if they could see any numbers in their neighborhood. The responses began to flood in as students pointed out phone numbers from realtor signs and posted speed limit signs. I also had one student point out a speed limit sign that read 60 km/hr, but she read the number as a six and a zero! What an authentic piece of assessment! Another revealing moment

was when I asked how many houses out of 5 were sold (these were four posts with one sold sign). Interestingly, the students read both sides of the sign not as one sign repeated but as two different signs, and decided that two houses had been sold!



This field trip proved to be invaluable for me, as I had gained quite a bit of information about my students' awareness of literacy, and some areas in which I could now plan instruction. For example, I noticed that many of my students had trouble elaborating on signs that contained phrases/clauses. This perhaps could be due, in part, to limited vocabulary. Another observation was that some of my students were pointing out phonics patterns and parts of words they recognized; thus, turning the activity into a phonics or decoding lesson. Lastly, it was clear that reading the realtor signs was a text that they were unfamiliar with even though they were surrounded by these texts on a daily basis.

Involving the Family

I sent a questionnaire home to all the families, titling it "Home Literacy Hunt". Along with the questionnaire, I enclosed a mention about the fact that students were surprised to discover that "reading" encompassed environmental print, and how students would be in charge of teaching the families about this hunt. This was a good lead into helping expand parents' perceptions of reading (that reading implies more than books). As expected, there were a lot of similarities with the texts found within these homes. Responses included everything from daily living routines, entertainment, sales, shopping flyers, school-related, work, and religion.

The differences between families were in the languages these texts were written in. What struck me was that the majority of my students used the computer to surf the web but only those students whose father's were out of town, used the computer as a writing tool-- for e-mail.

Connecting the Pieces

To plan an authentic literacy lesson, I took some time to reflect upon the information I gathered from both our school and home experiences. To begin, I thought about the events that captured me and how they related to my student's present lives. For instance, the numerous realtor signs piqued my interest! Moreover, it is especially interesting how this particular text lends itself towards a landscape encompassing this neighborhood. Many of my students had either recently moved to this school and/or neighborhood or were in the process of moving to the neighborhood. Through the "Home Literacy Hunt", I also noticed that many families reported having realtor flyers sent to them in the mail. Given that this was a text found in their homes and the community, I centered my theme on the neighborhood community. This was also advantageous as it naturally integrated with my Social Studies learning outcomes.

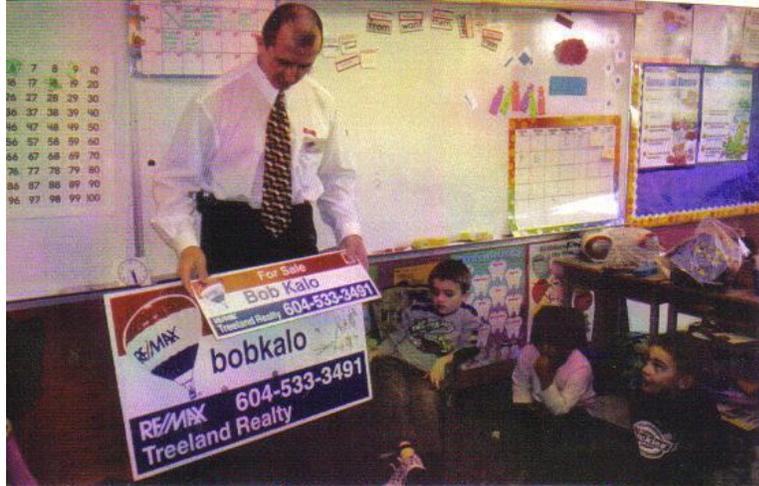
As part of this activity, I decided to also focus on the literacy skill of phonics, through a word study approach. With this instructional focus in mind (phonics and learning about the community), I now thought about an authentic text for this lesson. As we were going to be learning about the neighboring community, it seemed natural to have students create a brochure (informational text). However, I still had to find a real audience for this text.

Luckily, a realtor had dropped by the school to donate a pumpkin to each class. Given that he was familiar with the neighborhood, I called him and asked if he would be interested in talking to my class about his profession while also addressing inquiries about the signs themselves. I then went on to ask if he would "stage" a request to the students. Specifically, I suggested that it would be advantageous to

Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

have student's create a brochure for children of similar ages who may, potentially, move into the neighborhood. With some laughter he agreed, and we decided upon asking the class to design a brochure explaining why they think other children would like to live in this neighborhood. By addressing the request in this manner, we would be sure to have the children's point of view on the subject matter.

The day had finally arrived for our realtor visit! The students and I were quite excited about having a realtor in the classroom! It was fascinating to see them connect ideas from the Literacy Walk to the classroom. Some of their comments included, "We saw that same board outside!";



"We saw your name outside!"; "We have a realtor, too!" After a long interactive discussion, the realtor's request was finally shared. To add to the excitement, our "classroom realtor" decided that a prize would be given to the group who designed the best brochure! These students could not wait to get started, especially knowing that their brochures would be read by other prospective children moving into the neighborhood! In fact, they were especially keen to pursue this task upon receiving the information that their brochures would be posted on the realtor's web page!

Instructional Planning

To keep my instructional focus at the forefront, I decided to assess where my student's spelling development was so that I could individualize their learning. To do this, I used the Primary Spelling Inventory by Bear, Invernizzi, Tempelton, & Johnston (2004). This information helped me plan for explicit word study lessons. Assessments indicated that a handful of my students were Letter Name spellers (ranging from middle to late), while many others were Within Word Pattern spellers (early to late). It was my expectation that students would have a chance to practice specific word patterns as they planned for their brochures.

<p>Examples of Candy</p> <p>CVC/CCVC/digraphs - short vowels</p> <p><i>Dots</i></p> <p><i>Crunch</i></p> <p><i>Chips</i></p> <p><i>Rolo</i></p> <p><i>Nibs</i></p> <p><i>Kids</i></p> <p>CVVC e-ea/ ee/ ie</p> <p><i>Reese</i></p> <p><i>Wheels</i></p> <p><i>Real</i></p> <p><i>Peach</i></p> <p><i>Peanut</i></p> <p><i>Pieces</i></p>	<p>To do this, I asked my students to bring in their candy wrappers from Halloween. We also discussed the types of candies, along with other items, that could be purchased from Mac's (the local convenience store), so that students could keep a focus on the topic for the brochure. I then "leveled" the candy wrappers according to their spelling results</p> <p>For guided practice, students mapped out a web (as part of the writing process) to brainstorm what children would love to purchase from Mac's. In doing so, they had the opportunity to practice these spelling patterns in meaningful contexts. Using the brochure, students also had the opportunity to write about Starbucks and once again, they practiced spelling in meaningful contexts. As part of my post-test, I assessed to see if students had mastered the specific patterns taught.</p>	<p>Word Sorts Using Wrappers</p> <p>Doubling</p> <p><i>Ruffles</i></p> <p><i>Coffee</i></p> <p><i>Glosette</i></p> <p><i>Dubble Bubble</i></p> <p><i>Tootsie</i></p> <p><i>Jolly</i></p>
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

What's Community Again?

Unfortunately, Mother Nature had interfered with our learning. Following an atypical snowstorm, many instructional days were missed due to power outages and extreme weather conditions. As it had been a couple of days since students had the opportunity to engage in Literacy Centers, I decided to do a "temperature check" to assess students' understanding of *community* so that I could plan for instruction. I asked my students to write about their community by responding to this open-ended topic, "Tell me about your neighborhood" and we first brainstormed events that occurred during the Literacy Hunt. Given that we had gone on a Literacy Walk, gone on field trips through the community, and written and orally discussed our community, I expected that students would have no problems in responding to this topic.

To my surprise, however, things looked a lot different than I had envisioned. The first comment that caught my attention was, "What's community again?" Secondly, as I read through the responses, I realized that many of my

students were either listing places found within their community without adding any details, or they had not made connections to classroom discussions relating to the topic (their ideas and information were irrelevant). “Why?” It quickly struck me that I had not prepared my students for writing the actual brochure. More importantly, my instructional focus (phonics/decoding) was not sufficient for the task. Yes, the task itself was authentic in that students were writing for a real purpose. However, without an understanding about the topic, would it be possible to write about it in a brochure? Needless to say, this assessment was now my new pre-test.

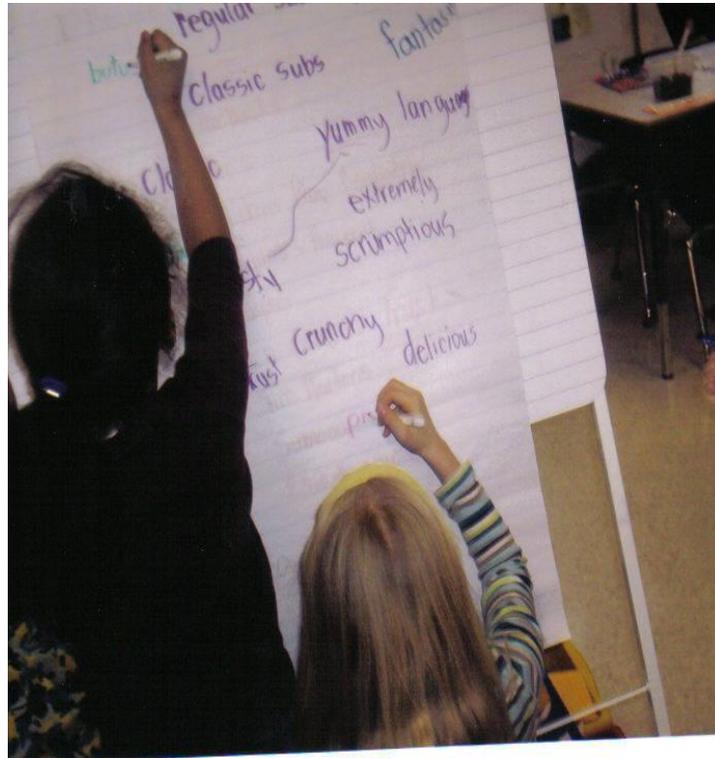
After recuperating from the initial shock, I realized that if I wanted my students to be successful at this task, I would have to expand my instructional focus. I decided that a focus on vocabulary and comprehension, through discussion, would support the writing of the brochures.

To do this, I used brochures from my students’ favorite places for a read-a-loud. This was especially meaningful as students were reading these brochures during silent and partner reading. Along with the read-a-loud, I chose three vocabulary words to have a conversation about.

I used the Text Talk framework (Beck, L., McKeown, G.M., & Kucan, L. (2003) . Text Talk focuses on teaching vocabulary from texts that are *read aloud* to children rather than being *read by* children. This particular strategy attracted me since my students were reading these same brochures to each other and to themselves, but with limited comprehension.

In addition, students also had the opportunity to make schema connections to these words, thereby strengthening their understanding of community. For instance, after an interactive discussion about the words, students were asked if they could think about text-to-self or text-to-world connections. Probing questions such as, “Have you ever had a *scrumptious* tasting pizza with all the *trimmings* before?” often sparked all students to share. This strategy was especially important for students who were English Language Learners as they had time to conference with a partner during “think-pair-share”, as well as time to hear other responses before sharing.

After each oral session, students were asked to use some ‘delicious’ words in planning their brochures so that they could practice applying these words in a different context. These “delicious” words were posted around the room for access. It was during this time that I could work individually with students to do some formative assessments. As well, to continue assessing my student’s on-going learning, I wrote these delicious words on slips of paper and placed them in a basket. At various points during the day, I would simply call out one of the words and have students use it in a sentence. This informal assessment allowed me to keep track of students who needed extra support with vocabulary development.



Assessment

For the post-test, I had students do a writing response for the same topic they had initially written about for the pre-test. “Tell me about your neighborhood community.” I assessed student’s writing by using the B.C. Performance Standards Rubric (Writing to Communicate Ideas and Information). More specifically, I looked at the meaning strand (ideas and information; use of detail), to assess the following; (a) Does the writing provide accurate and basic information based on class discussions? and (b) Does the writing include specific details related to the vocabulary words discussed in class?

Results

Students, in a very short period of time, demonstrated growth in both their understanding of community and their ability to communicate these ideas onto paper. For the most part, these sample assessments indicate the varying depths of response from the pre-test to the post-test. For example, pre-test assessments included more recounts than a sharing of information. This is an important factor in that informational texts, such as brochures, are often read by an audience to gain in-depth information about a topic. Recall, students were asked to state reasons *why* other kids would like to move into this community. The post-test assessments indicated that the students applied their knowledge of language and understanding about the topic to write in a persuasive manner. They did this by adding vocabulary, specific details and information related to the topic.

Students were now prepared to write the brochure! Needless to say, many Writers’ Workshop hours were spent creating and designing the brochures. To keep the momentum alive and allow for a time frame, we decided to have a countdown to the official deadline day. The days passed, and the final celebratory moment finally

Authentic Literacy Instruction: Model Lesson

arrived! Each students' efforts were graciously acknowledged by the realtor (he gave each student a stuffed toy). Next, brochures meeting the criteria (detailed language and vital neighborhood information) were chosen for the web page. The class celebrated everyone's success! This moment truly reflected a community of its own!

Final Thoughts

Designing effective authentic literacy instruction in classrooms needs to involve the students. This became clear to me the moment my students became part of the process. Reflecting back to our Literacy Walk, I realized that on several occasions, my eyes were shut to what students could see in their neighborhood. Moreover, as I continued to operate with my focus, a mismatch between my teaching and students' learning began to surface. However, by reflecting upon this information and listening to their voices, I, in turn, was able to plan for purposeful and authentic literacy instruction that made sense to the students. In doing so, I helped my student's learn and conceptualize, in real and meaningful ways, the skills that I, as a practitioner, needed to impart.