

Superdiversity of Literacies, theories, methods and approaches as a means of social justice – Isabel Osuna-Gatty

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Welcome to ATESOL NT First Webinar. My name is Isabel Osuna-Gatty, I am the vice-president of ATESOL NT and I would like to share a seminar I presented at the 2017 RaPAL's Global Literacies in Liverpool England. RaPAL's stands for Research and Practice in Adult Literacy. RaPAL is the only UK-wide organisation that focuses on the role of literacies in adult life.

I have been working in the Adult Literacy space for many years and I have been working with remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory since 2010.

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I am sharing this quote from Ghandi as I believe that we can bring change in the world one classroom at a time.

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This presentation is based on my experience as teacher in remote Aboriginal communities.

I will speak about the role of neuroscience in our practice, meaningful learning and Paulo Freire's method.

This unique methodology comprising learning and teaching approaches to EAL and Literacy is also a powerful tool to accelerate and intensify processes of cross-cultural social integration, which might be useful to other practitioners assisting other superdiverse communities.

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The aims of this workshop are:

- to present and share this unique and superdiverse teaching learning approach and
- to raise awareness on the power of literacy as a social justice tool

I use my teaching practice to promote social change and to empower Aboriginal learners, I teach awareness of Human Rights, and other important issues and responsibilities using this 'multi-literacy' approach. I use my classroom as a means of problem solving and promoting social justice, which results in a professional practice which meets the needs of a superdiverse cohort and assists with the social integration of learners at a local and national level.

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As a practitioner, I believe that my course content needs to be used with a purpose and its intention to bring enlightenment and change.

Aboriginal communities are still excluded from many aspects of our society, but they will in a globalised world, where they can use the internet to see how communities live and what these communities have access to.

I can use my classrooms to bring social change to help address poverty and inequality, I can encourage critical thinking and advocacy.

I use my practice as a means of social justice.

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Aboriginal people make up 30% of the population of the Northern Territory, they speak 20 different languages, and English is usually their third or fourth additional language. My classrooms are comprised of learners coming from remote Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory; besides speaking different languages, they also have very different cultural backgrounds, English is the language they use to communicate with each other. This

superdiversity means that Aboriginal learners need to consolidate English literacy skills while learning English as a Second language, so English becomes an Additional language. Only 1 in 10 Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory have the literacy skills to cope competently within the workplace or in education.¹

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One of the things I notice in Australian classrooms was the use of a workbook as the main tool of teaching, this approach is currently being used in formal education. Teachers assume that because Aboriginal people are able to communicate in English, they are also proficient in reading and writing.

But unfortunately, this is not the case.

As a former ESL student myself, I had learnt how to speak, read and write English all at the same time, but as native Spanish speaker, I realised that I learnt how to speak Spanish as a baby, and then my mother taught me how to read and write later on when I was a toddler.

Then, I went on to learn other languages in the same way, reading, writing and speaking at the same time. Scientific journals had reported bilingual people who had acquired a brain injury, losing the capacity to speak their native language, while keeping the capacity to speak their second language.

There were have also cases of people who had suffered a brain aneurysm who had to relearn how to speak even though they still could read and sometimes write without much effort.

I knew that neuroscience was holding the answer to this riddle. The brain must store speaking, reading and writing in different parts, and these parts must connect when necessary.

¹ A statistical overview: Aboriginal adult LLN in the Northern Territory, Shalley F. and Stewart A., Whole of Community Engagement Initiative Office of the PVC of Indigenous Leadership, Charles Darwin University 2017.

In my experience, the majority of Aboriginal learners speak English quite fluently and flawlessly, most identify certain words in a text but they find difficult spelling and writing.

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Finally, in 2015, neuroscientists from Rice University and Columbia University discovered that writing and speaking are supported by different parts of the brain, especially in the high-level aspects of word construction. Therefore, what we say isn't what we write.

According to these researchers, writing evolved from speaking, these two brain systems are 'so independent that someone who can't speak a grammatically correct sentence aloud may be able write it flawlessly.'

Or vice versa, I was finally able to understand my students, the key was to connect a spoken sentence to writing. For example:

Speaking: 'The man is catching a fish' - Writing: 'The men is catches a fish'. This example taken from the researchers' journal perfectly illustrates the type of grammatical errors my students showed.

The key is to teach from speaking to writing and not the other way around, which is the common practice in our classrooms.

When students arrive in class, they are given a workbook to fill in, not only this is very daunting to someone who doesn't read in English, but also it raises their levels of anxiety and stress.

I changed my approach from 'storytelling' to writing. According to the researchers, grammar acquisition was easier when using word constructions using prefixes and suffixes.

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My method consisted then of writing their story on the board and then picking up verbs and/or nouns and add prefixes and suffixes, changing their stories around with different meanings.

Learners could relate as they were the authors of the stories and I added more information to those stories, expanding their skills and knowledge. This scaffolding approach is called: “Meaningful Learning”.

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Consolidating English language skills

In 1963, David Ausubel, an American psychologist created the theory of “Meaningful Learning” which proposed that learners need to relate new concepts or ideas to what they already know and understand. It is a scaffolding process which makes acquiring new knowledge easier and faster.

For example, it is very difficult to learn about a subject of which you have no knowledge about, but it is easier to build knowledge on top of something you already know. I ask my students to tell me what they already know and I build on that. And most of the time, I am learning from them. What a fabulous opportunity to learn about the longest living culture in the world!

Using this approach, I am able to consolidate what they already knew in terms of English literacy, adding new knowledge and skills in terms of English language acquisition and at the end, learners were able to express themselves both orally and in writing in English as an Additional language.

Sentences such as: ‘Thank you for learning me’ would change to: ‘Thank you for teaching me’. Random emails such as these, reinforced my purpose for teaching, to give someone the opportunity of a better opportunity in life.

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No textbooks or workbooks required – the power of literacy as a social justice tool

In 1962, Paulo Freire formed a test group of 300 sugar cane workers and taught them how to read and write in only 40 hours without textbooks for the period of 45 days. Freire criticised the traditional method of teaching literacy using textbooks only. Freire started his work teaching Portuguese literacy to people from low socio-economic backgrounds because, in Brazil at that time, literacy was a requirement for voting in presidential elections. His method consisted of 3 steps: Research, Create awareness and Challenge reality.

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Research: As a start, teacher asks students to choose the most significant words and themes in their lives, including the words used in the community. In my experience, those words are usually connected to everyday life, such as education, employment, health.

In my classrooms I use visuals found in Google images, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid, health posters available in the community or the illustrated version of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

As they choose words, I write them on the whiteboard. They create their own glossary and build their own vocabulary.

Then I pick a theme and then we start a conversation.

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Create awareness: This conversation has the purpose of analysing the social meaning of those words and themes.

For example, having lived in a remote community all their lives, these learners may not know that access to education, clean water, housing are all human rights.

Using the Illustrated UN Declaration of human rights, I use the images to start conversations and connect them to everyday words. I use these words to add prefixes and suffixes.

I also use the computer to access a dictionary and find out meanings, which have words which make a connection to the learner.

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Challenge: Through dialogue, I ask my students to focus their attention on the reality that surrounds them, which is usually very evident, lack of resources, infrastructure, and so on, and inspire them to challenge that reality. For example, I would ask them: When the next politician comes in and quickly visits your town, what would you suggest for them to do for you?

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These phrases have been spoken by students across the Top End.

Conclusion:

My practice is about promoting social change and empowering learners, I teach awareness of human rights, and other important issues and responsibilities using this 'multi-literacy' approach. I use my classroom as a means of problem solving and promoting social justice, which results in a professional practice which meets the needs of a superdiverse cohort and assists with the social integration of learners at a local and national level.

Thank you

Link to Illustrated UN Declaration of Human Rights:

<http://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/index.shtml>