

Viewpoint:



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The Literacies for Learning in Further Education research project, funded by the ESRC, has been running for nearly three years now. It has explored how reading or writing on an FE course can have relevance for students. After collecting data from 12 subject areas across four colleges, we now have many examples of how, for a given student on a given course, some aspects of what they read and write in their everyday lives are in fact quite relevant to their coursework and vice versa.

Links between everyday life and coursework are not surprising, one might say, especially when we're expected to be so driven by a learner-centred culture. However, we also have plenty of evidence now that there is still plenty of untapped potential for making these connections via literacy stronger across the contexts of home, work and leisure. Indeed, we've found that these links (potential and actual) often go unseen by educators and students alike until they take time to consider them.

Missing Out

The implication for practitioners is that they're missing out on the opportunity to draw on this potential in their approaches to teaching and learning. The project is now moving towards a way of helping staff and students notice these connections and devising ways of helping staff of make use of them. To write and talk about all this we're finding 'resonance' a useful term.

Resonance is a concept drawn from the field of music, describing when two objects are vibrating in sympathy. We suggest the term can usefully be applied to literacy. After reading a newspaper or magazine you may have commented that some feature 'struck a chord' with you; we take this commonsense notion of 'striking a chord' as the starting point for considering teaching and learning. So how does reading and writing generate this feeling of resonance; how is the chord struck?

We've found examples in all of our 12 different subject areas where students' everyday literacy practices can be said to be resonant with the literacy practices of their courses and vice versa.

Chords are being struck but in many different ways. We've met music students who read biographies of famous artists, childcare students who read magazines about health and welfare issues and catering students who file away recipes they have tried out at home. We've encountered multimedia students who use a range of related software and digital media to help them organise their everyday lives.

Wavelength

One way of putting it is to say that resonance is brought about along different 'wavelengths' or aspects of the process of reading, writing and communicating. For one student it may be that the *topic* is what's important – in other words what is being read or written about is what makes it resonant. So if the topic of a book being read at home is similar to the topic of a course, we can say there is *topic resonance*. For another student it may be critical that the *medium* being used to assist with reading and writing is the same in the different contexts. For another student, it can be critical that the *audience* of the texts they produce have relevance for who they want to be or who they want to become.

Clearly, there are diverse ways in which resonance can be experienced. We suggest a number of different wavelengths along which resonance can be achieved. These include (and this is not an exhaustive list): *topic resonance, genre resonance, audience resonance, resonance of purpose and resonance of medium*.

How does reading and writing generate this feeling of resonance; how is the chord struck?

Striking a Chord

Greg Mannon on making coursework and curricula more resonant with students' everyday lives.

We've identified a number of wavelengths along which resonance is experienced and by implication, these wavelengths need to be *tuned into* by educators if resonance via literacy is to be achieved. An example of a recent successful project intervention may explain better how tuning-in to students' own literacies can be achieved.

For one lecturer, the recommended assessed piece of work was a curriculum vitae. For his students, who were almost all musicians, working in various ways in the industry, a CV rarely forms part of the press kits they often need to provide. Instead, he required the students to produce web-friendly 'Bios', a form of self-promotion and communication that is popular and which would be useful to the students in their day-to-day lives. The student's work was supported with web-based advice and examples. Because of the choice of genre and the attention to authentic audience, the writing was rendered more resonant across the students' contexts of work, college and leisure here.

We're not suggesting that all features of our teaching need to be resonant for all students, all the time. This is likely to be impossible and unwelcome. In fact, it may be critical that for learning to take place some degree of dissonance may be essential.

Some advice then for practitioners who might want to set tasks for students that are resonant with the everyday? This is not a comprehensive list but a few starting points and questions:

- get to know more about your students' everyday literacy lives.
- be explicit with your students about how resonance is made possible through the tasks you set – are you asking for a report or an essay?
- ask what alternative types of communication would be more relevant to your students in your subject areas.
- make sure reading and writing allows students to do something purposeful and meaningful in terms of who they are (or who they want to be).

We also suggest educators need to consider the genre, audience and media through which they require students to communicate. Are these aspects of reading and writing likely to resonate with things with which your students are comfortable? Are they relevant to the workplace destinations students are aiming towards? Do students submit texts for assessment for which the only audience is you, the lecturer?

What we're inviting you to do is to consider students' everyday and vocationally-oriented literacies as a potentially valuable resource base when designing assessments, coursework and reading and writing activities. We now have some frameworks for helping practitioners think about and address this. Fine tuning (and sometimes radically re-tuning) coursework is what we advocate. We can begin by listening into the different wavelengths of students' own, purposeful, everyday reading and writing practices and then begin to adjust the wavelengths of course literacy-related tasks accordingly.

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