

Ten ways for cultivating language and literacy learning through engagement with families and communities.

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Author: Phillips, Louise
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Sharing stories, places and interests are three main ways to connect people: to bring people together and cultivate learning communities. The following provides ten ideas under these three categories.

STORIES

Humans of all ages love to hear and tell stories. In these stories we share our experiences, our cultures and our imaginations. And we enhance our language (styles of speech, expressions, vocabulary, syntax, semantics) and literacy knowledge (context, interactions, comprehension, story creation). Zelda Quakawoot, a Song Room teaching artist who led a visual storytelling project in Mackay, demonstrates a great example of sharing stories with families and community see ARTS: LIVE interactive web application story starters activity page. Stories may be shared orally or as image and print texts. Here are some ways you may promote story sharing:

IDEA ONE: Story circle Perhaps you may establish a regular practice of sharing stories in your class routine, then invite families. The family story circles could be on a particular theme or idea e.g. funny stories of their child when they were younger. Family story circles could become a regular gathering e.g. first Friday evening of every month. Create a story idea box with cards for story prompts e.g. your best birthday ever, that can be continually added to like a suggestion box.

IDEA TWO: Story cafe If the numbers are too big for one story circle then set up as a story cafe, so that small groups of say six take turns to tell stories to each other responding to prompt starters e.g. a proud moment, an embarrassing time.

IDEA THREE: Family story journals Provide each child with a blank journal book at orientation (or at the start of the year) to invite family stories. Provide prompts to encourage participation e.g. share when you were most proud of your child. These journals entries can be composed with photos, drawings and writing, and can travel between home and school at certain intervals, or you may set-up a closed online space for digital story sharing e.g. see <http://placestories.com>.

PLACES

Families and school staff traverse through common spaces on their journeys to and from schools. Transforming spaces into places involves having a personal connection to the place, that is, place-making. Connection to community places is something that families and staff at a school can collaborate together to create. Place-making learning also offers children opportunities to engage with the world beyond the classroom, to connect with the community. The following provides some suggestions on how to facilitate place-making to engage families and communities in language and literacy learning.

IDEA FOUR: Neighbourhood walks Invite children to lead neighbourhood walks of places that they see of interest to share with others. Children may lead the walk solo, in pairs or as a small group. Invite families to be led on the walks. The walks could be designed to explore and present different learning area content e.g. an historical walk of local historical sites or a geographical walk of different

land features. Consulting with local community experts, such as elders or historians, can further enhance content knowledge for such walks. Or invite different family groups to lead walks of their immediate neighbourhood, sharing the insider knowledge of their neighbourhood.

IDEA FIVE: Community Garden Whether based on the school grounds or in the local community, community gardens are a great way for bringing people together for a shared objective of cultivating edible produce to share and engage in sustainable living practices. The articles by Linda Gawne and Rebecca Ramsden in this issue provide rich evidence of language literacy learning gains through Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Gardens at their schools.

If establishing a community garden at your school is not possible, connect with a local community-placed garden. See the Australian City Farms and Community Gardens Network (<http://communitygarden.org.au/>) to find a community garden or city farm near you, or tips on how to start one.

IDEA SIX: Environmental care Get connected with your local bush care group and water catchment groups to work with them to regenerate, protect and nurture local bush and waterways. Through such collaborations children listen and speak with community members, expanding bush and water care knowledge and vocabulary. The lived, sensory experience of visiting sites incites connection to local natural spaces. Children, families and teachers may go on to become involved in creating signage, petitions, fundraising and writing letters to the media and politicians to get further support.

IDEA SEVEN: Community art Local councils support the creation of community art works. Build strong connections with your local council to know when community art projects are happening. This may involve contributions to landscape designs--see Wells & Trimboli (2014) for detailed rich accounts of place-making with primary school students, their families and their local community, mural painting on walls, mosaics or sculptures. Community art adds colour and stories to spaces to create places that people love and share.

INTERESTS

Shared interests bring people together in local communities, which may be based on culture, the arts or community concerns. As teachers we need to have our nose and ears to the ground to be aware of what is drawing people together in the local community and actively participate in and build on these interests. Here are some ideas to nurture these interests for language and literacy learning gains.

IDEA EIGHT: Cultural groups Within any school there is bound to be diversity of culture. Ask families that represent different cultures if they are involved in a cultural group. Get to know their celebrations and events and seek out ways for the class or school to be involved. Cultural celebrations unite people. Children will expand cultural understandings. Being thrust into a context in which a language other than your own is only used provokes great decoding and meaning-making challenges. See Adele Amorsen's article in this issue for suggestions on how to include linguistically diverse families in the classroom by connecting through culture and languages other than English. For a register of arts and cultural organisations in Australia see <http://arts.gov.au/roco> and <http://www.acn.net.au/>

IDEA NINE: Arts projects and events People express themselves through multiple modes through the arts, offering richly layered decoding, meaning-making, usage and analysis of diverse complex texts. Community arts projects and events are an energised and creative way to bring people together. Such projects and events may include community music, dance, theatre, film and literature festivals, parades and artist in residencies to build community capacity through the arts. See <http://arts.org.au> and <http://www.songroom.org.au> to explore community arts possibilities in Australia.

IDEA TEN: Local community concerns From time to time there can be a local community concern that motivates people to come together to take action. Such concerns could be closure of a local service, urban development of parklands or even proposed closure of the school. Family participation in community meetings, networking, social media, petitions, letter writing, and media interviews engage a wide range of language and literacy practices exchanged within a community of

learners who have gathered with a shared goal of communicating to those of influence the community's needs, interests and concerns. Linda Willis's article in this issue provides great examples of students, parents and teachers engaging in language and literacy learning to address the concern for refugee rights.

This list is offered as a starter to invite engagement with families and communities to cultivate language and literacy learning. I am sure you all have further ideas, but I hope that there is at least one unfamiliar idea or resource that you have gained and feel inspired to explore.

References

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Louise Phillips is Co-editor of *Practically Primary* and lecturer in early years, arts and literacy education and a professional storyteller. Her research interests include children's active community participation. Email: louise.phillips@uq.edu.au

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