

Spaces and Pedagogies



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DESIGNING A CHILDREN'S LITERATURE COURSE FOR DIVERSE ADULT LEARNERS: CO-CONSTRUCTING LEARNING SPACES THROUGH CREATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

In New Zealand, the New Zealand Qualification Authority's Mandatory Review of Qualifications for levels 1-6 prompted the writing of new courses to be delivered in the New Zealand Certificate in Study and Career Preparation Levels 3 and 4. In the Bridging Education programme in a large urban polytechnic, this provided the opportunity to design a suite of four courses for new-to-tertiary students in the Education Vocational Pathway. The course development team sought to co-construct a space, the Children's Literature course, where our diverse students – in a space between their whānau (family), the world of study and their future careers as teachers – could be at the centre of their own education.

The course aims to widen learners' experience and knowledge of children's literature, to build confidence and literacy. Through research, academic discussion, sharing on social media and creative projects, learners interact with and create a diverse repertoire of nursery rhymes, stories and illustrations to take with them into further study and practice in education settings. The course enables a deeper knowledge of, and interaction with, Māori and Pasifika literature and language, and examines aspects of other cultures present in Aotearoa New Zealand today. The creative projects give our diverse students the opportunity to share their cultural values with their peers and lecturers.

This paper describes the course development and shares some examples of student work and evaluations. High levels of satisfaction, growth in confidence and academic literacy were reported. Important success factors were a strengths-based philosophy, accessible and diverse literature, creative projects and the use of social media. The conclusion suggests future directions for staff and student research.

INTRODUCTION

The New Zealand Certificate of Study and Career Preparation Level 3 was created following the National Mandatory Review of Qualifications (MRoQ) for Foundation and Bridging Education in New Zealand during 2015. Bridging courses provide academic preparation for students to enter degree-level programmes. In Bridgepoint: Bridging Education, Unitec Institute of Technology, new courses were written adopting the recent Ministry of Education Vocational Pathways model, enhancing 'line of sight' to students' chosen discipline. The new courses were developed to meet with Ministry of Education and Unitec requirements: to embed literacy and numeracy, embed mātauranga Māori and foster twenty-first century skills such as collaboration, problem-solving and creative thinking. In addition, all programmes report on the progression of priority learners: Māori and Pasifika learners, under-25-year-olds and international students.

LOCAL ENVIRONMENT AND PROJECT DESIGN

To further understand our students, this project began by looking at who they are and what dreams they had for the future. The staff involved in the design of the Children's Literature course also reflected on their own experiences of students' challenges entering tertiary study, of working in bridging education, and of the elements they value which celebrate diversity and creativity. Additionally, they reviewed the literature on children's literature courses in teacher-education programmes. Issues identified as significant drivers for the design of these programmes in the United States offered an interesting counterpoint to our situation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The student cohort in level 3 is typically diverse in age and ethnicity, and many are priority learners, defined as "groups of students who have been identified as historically not experiencing success in the New Zealand schooling system" (Education Review Office, 2012, p. 4). Priority learners include Māori and Pasifika students, those with special

educational needs, and those from low socio-economic status (SES). Konai Helu Thaman alludes to just one example of the challenges faced by Pasifika students when she describes “how she had to hang her cultural identification and orientation on the trees outside the classroom and ‘forget who I was for a while’” (Thaman, 2003, p. 11).

In 2016, all students were surveyed by the Unitec Business Intelligence Capability Centre, in a major quantitative and qualitative project, about their experience of being a student at Unitec. From the 1964 responses, levels 2-4 vocational and pre-degree students said “I want to be doing something that I love”, that they are interested in “making positive life changes, being respected and valued by others, earning a ‘decent’ income, fulfilling their potential, working in a role that that they enjoy and/or will benefit others who have experienced similar set-backs to themselves” (Unitec Institute of Technology, 2016, para. 24). These students have high aspirations, but often low confidence and literacy. The majority in the Education Vocational Pathway hope to become early childhood and primary school teachers.

DRAWING ON TRANSITION LITERATURE

Unitec lecturers’ experience in Bridging Education aligns with Australian first-year experience literature. Bradley et al. wrote that, “Australian research evidence shows the success rate (or tendency to pass their year’s subjects) of low SES students is 97% of the pass rates of their medium and high SES peers, and has been stable over the last five years” (Bradley et al., as cited in Wilson, 2012). This is subject to the students’ receiving “higher levels of support to succeed” such as mentoring, counselling, academic assistance and financial support (Wilson, 2012). This encouraging data places the responsibility broadly across the institute (on students, and professional and academic staff alike) to ensure that the first year of tertiary studies is engaging and supportive.

In 2006, Lizzio developed the Five Senses of Success framework expressing successful student transition into higher education through five domains: sense of academic culture, sense of connectedness, sense of capability, sense of purpose, and sense of resourcefulness. This strength-based model informed our design philosophy. We aspired to create a learning space that enabled students to stay connected to their own networks while supporting them to learn how to be students, i.e., participating in academic culture, making new pathway connections and forging a sense of connectedness. With intentional course design that is structured to enable early success, and responsive pastoral care that supports students to attend, use support services and submit course work, students can develop a sense of themselves as capable and resourceful learners. With practical experiences in their discipline early in the semester, they grow in academic and professional identity. Their own and their communities’ aspirations fuel a sense of purpose that has the potential to enable the contribution of (often under-represented) perspectives.

The Unitec course development and teaching team embraced the opportunity to co-create a first-year experience course, specifically tailored to Aotearoa in Auckland (the largest Polynesian city in the world), and informed by transition best-practice guidelines. The team perceive the students as gifted with broad knowledge and experiences of diverse cultures. They wanted to create a safe space that privileges the students’ knowledge and culture, and a course design that invites participation and contribution. The aim was to place these students in the centre of their own learning as artists, researchers and teachers (Jevic & Springgay, 2008), where they could share their identity and cultural taonga (treasures) with their peers, teachers and communities. In this way they could build on their strengths and stay connected to their own cultures as they grow in academic capability in ways that are directly relevant to their professional ambitions.

Children’s literature was chosen because at some level it is something most people share. It allows cultural identity to flourish and supports Māori and Pasifika cultures of oral storytelling. The team looked forward to hearing new voices as the students engaged in story and art making. Diversity can create dynamic creativity and, as Robinson claims, “great scientific breakthroughs have almost always come through some form of fierce collaboration among people. ... Collaboration, diversity, the exchange of ideas, and building on other people’s achievements are at the heart of the creative process” (Robinson, cited in Azzam, 2009, p. 25).

The course designers were also mindful of the need to decolonise education by incorporating indigenous perspectives, ways of knowing and wisdom, with particular regard to the multiple experiences of Pacific peoples (Thaman, 2003). Similarly, it is “essential for Pacific peoples that the creative arts and other forms of cultural production take up what formal educational institutions have marginalised as non-essential in the twenty-first century” (Thaman, cited in Mackley-Crump, 2011, p. 257).

CHILDREN’S LITERATURE IN TEACHER-EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

There is limited research on the design of children’s literature courses in teacher education or bridging settings. Most often, the focus is on ‘using children’s literature’ for an instructive purpose. The most frequent ‘use’ was to enhance student teachers’ cultural competence (Landa & Stephens, 2017; Papola-Ellis, 2016; Smith & Wiese, 2006). This use arose in North America, where ill-prepared novice teachers, (of whom an estimated 87% are Caucasian), were teaching in schools where over 37% of students are “culturally, linguistically, and ethnically different from the dominant U.S. culture” (Escamilla & Nathenson-Mejía, 2003, p. 238). Theoretical frameworks such as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Multicultural Education (Deardorff, 2011) are utilised in the following example:

The instructor selected six non-dominant identity groups that pre-service teachers would likely encounter in their future classrooms, and provided opportunities for students to explore their literary and social contributions to American society as well as the ways in which they have been subjected to marginalization and exploitation. (Landa & Stephens, 2017, p. 58)

Other examples that student teachers in children’s literature courses undertook were analysing representation of groups in children’s media, identifying stereotypes, historical misinformation and power dynamics that subjugated or dismissed characters from minority groups.

The second-most-frequent use of children’s literature for was in teaching linguistic skills to adult students as “children’s literature can be effective in teaching linguistic skills such as pronunciation practice and improving language acquisition” (Ho, 2000, p. 259).

In contrast, Unitec’s students are treated as experts. Rather than designing an intervention or programme for tertiary students that is didactic in nature, the design team’s perspective is that the students come with a kete (basket) of knowledge, including tales, rhymes, songs and images, from which everyone benefits when explored and shared. This engagement is inherently reciprocal and enriching (Freeman, Feeney, & Moravcik, 2011). While the students discover that “children’s literature offers a rich source of information on culture, history and social issues” (Landa & Stephens, 2017, p. 58), the impetus is enjoyment, sharing, entertainment, beauty, fantasy, fun and wisdom. Landa and Stephens, Ho, and Smith and Wiese all concur on the potential of children’s literature for enrichment, but perhaps arrive at this similar place through different means.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILDREN’S LITERATURE COURSE

The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum Te Whāriki is a key document for the Education Vocational Pathway and offers guiding principles. The Unitec team sought to express the core principles of *whakamana* (empowerment), *kotahitanga* (holistic development), *whānau tangata* (family and community), *ngā hononga* (relationships) and language through the course. In their relationships they aspire to live in *mahi kotahitanga* (cooperation) and *ngākau mahaki* (respect) with their students and fellow colleagues. They demonstrate this through welcome and hospitality to the students and their *whānau* (family), believing that what the students experience may be as influential as what they are taught. The team are ever mindful to uphold the “essential values of the heart without which knowledge, power and action lose their meaning and purpose” (Charter of the Communities of L’Arche, 1993, p. 3).

The Children’s Literature course was designed as one course within a suite of four complementary courses in the Education Pathway. The learning outcomes are as follows:

1. 1. Identify and examine a range of genres and approaches employed in developing oral, visual and written texts for children.
2. 2. Determine how to select children's literature representative of Māori and other particular cultures or ethnic groups.
3. 3. Apply knowledge of a particular children's literary form in the production of a creative or academic work.
4. 4. Communicate clearly using academic conventions and present findings to an audience.

The design of the Children's Literature course is threefold: three modules in which there are three assessment tasks. The first module focuses on rhymes: nursery rhymes, finger-plays, hopscotch and skipping rhymes, oral calls, chants and lullabies. The second focuses on stories: traditional and modern storytelling, folk and fairy tales, both oral and written. The third focuses on art: illustration and image-making in children's books.

Of the three assessment tasks, the first prompts wide reading/listening/viewing with rhymes, stories or illustrations collated on a virtual shared space (the visual media platform Pinterest). Students were invited to pin (post) on Pinterest because it is familiar and easy to use – social media is a learning space they habitually inhabit, it facilitates collecting and sharing with peers and whānau, and in its somewhat addictive capacity fosters the habit of frequent engagement with literature. Another reason for using an online curation site is because engaging with the online environment is associated with success in first-year tertiary study (Kift, 2010; Lorimer et al., 2016).

The second assessment prompts close reading of the text, using a series of investigations into the history, setting, style, language features, media and techniques of a few chosen works. Lastly is the creative project, which for 'rhymes' is a performance, for 'stories' the writing of an original story, and for 'art' the creation of illustrations for the student's own story.

The course developers hoped that the students might also develop a love for children's literature in all its forms. Drawing on the work of Fink (2013), the developers engaged in backwards design. The developers wanted the students to start with their own *taonga* (treasures) and to dive into literature, beginning with their own knowledge and ways of knowing. They were invited to share their rhymes and stories, to remember, to ask and listen to the chants and stories of their *whānau* (family) and to read widely. Because the course developers wanted the focus to be on immersion in literature, marks were weighted towards wide exploration.

In the 15-week course, each of the three modules ran for a month. Students were encouraged to pin (post) their findings daily on Pinterest. The rubric specified marks for quantity of posts (an A grade averaged one a day for a month); variety of posts (including different genres, from different times, places, cultures and languages); and captioning each post with a brief personal reflection. Insight, critical thinking, inter-textual comment or comparison to one's own traditions were rewarded with higher marks.

For students who are often highly visually literate but less confident verbally, children's literature can provide an accessible entry into critical analysis and academic skill development. In the second task in each module, students explore their literature finds by investigating different literary features – for example, in week one, the history, in week two, the language. The lecturer facilitates and models the process by researching the different origins of nursery rhymes, comparing and discussing them, and discerning the credibility of sources. Some students find articulating their opinion difficult, sometimes because it has not been part of their upbringing or prior schooling. Finding their voice in critical reflection and creative work is a significant learning outcome.

The third assessment task is the creative product. Students need to work in pairs, or a small group, to choose, prepare, rehearse and perform two chosen rhymes. The requirement of a group task early in the semester is intentional, as relationships with peers is a significant predictor of retention in first-year students (Wilson et al., 2011). Also, the occasion is relevant to their discipline in that students are publicly in the role of a teacher. Another predictor of success is a sense of purpose and relevance to one's chosen career (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). The performance is an occasion of singing, dancing and speaking that further widens knowledge and experience of rhymes, and showcases the cultural treasures of Unitec's diverse students. Each group performs two rhymes, the first in full performance mode



Figure 1: Module 1 – Creative performance of a nursery rhyme: Interactive teaching to an audience. (Source: Kayes, 2017)

and the second as an interactive teaching occasion. This process and occasion acknowledges Brown's philosophy that, "genealogy and spiritual influences are important, and opportunities need to be provided for these values to be expressed through mediums such as art, song or dance" (Brown, cited in Mackley-Crump, 2011, p. 258). Students sourced their rhymes from their traditions, churches, childhood experiences, books and the internet.

For the second creative project, the writing of a story, students are free to choose any subject but are encouraged to draw on their own family and cultural stories. Before they start writing, they have read widely and closely. One approach is to rewrite a traditional story but in the student's current place and time. Again, marks are weighted towards process and exploration, drafting and crafting their story.

The story then becomes the source of the illustrations for the third creative project. Students view a vast range of picture book art from classic sources to diverse cultures, contemporary and local texts. Responses focus on visual literacy and using academic conventions to express their ideas. Piaget's and Vygotsky's emphasis on the value and dignity of play (Halpenny & Pettersen, 2013) informs the wide experimentation required in media and techniques. Marks are weighted toward the exploration evident in the student's visual diaries over the final two products.

RESULTS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The submissions the students present are a delight: zany, fantastical, funny, topical and heroic. One such example is based on a student's actual family history. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the unlawful appropriation of Māori land

during the settler days is an ongoing area of debate, grievance and resolution. Using strong simple language, this student's story depicted a child in contemporary time and local place using the democratic process to stop an ugly development and restore precious family land. The story's significance is its authenticity and connection with the deep values and history of the student's family. The spirit of efficacy and agency the child in the story portrays is powerful, as are the everyday images of hasty urban development. When students are given the respect, time, place and resources to tell their own stories, the results are a form of creative leadership and are worthy of a wider audience. These students become practising artists, researchers and teachers (Burke & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009.)

Students rated their learning as highly aligned to the learning outcomes (see Appendix B), and evaluations of the course were very positive. Questionnaires (see Appendix A) were done in class on the last day of each module and approximately 70% of students completed them. Additionally, there was a check-in evaluation in week three to see how students were settling in and to identify any questions they might have, and a whole-course evaluation at the end of the course. The main themes from the check-in were that students were enjoying the class and that they liked the "friendly/supportive/welcoming" atmosphere. The few questions raised by students focused on wanting particular information about assessments.

To analyse evaluation data, the development team studied the student evaluations by topic module and assessment type, and student grades for each assessment type.

Students commented favourably on all modules; the nursery rhyme module received the greatest number of positive comments. What students valued most in the module was enjoyment of the rhymes and interest in their origins, becoming a group and performing in front of the class. Typical feedback in regard to valued aspects was: "Learning the origins of nursery rhymes was something I found really interesting" and "Performance of the nursery rhymes because I got to build up my confidence as in the past I wasn't that good with performing in front of the people I don't know". (See Appendix C for samples of student comments.)

Of the three assessment types – the reading log collated on Pinterest, the close reading in the text responses and the creative product (for the performance, story, illustrations) – the creative product received the highest number of positive student comments. What students valued about the creative product was "being creative, using my own ideas, writing my own story". They valued learning about the process, planning and rehearsing a performance, structuring a story and exploring media. Students valued "Writing a children's story because I enjoyed having my own characters", and "Exploring different uses of colours and drawing styles to illustrate my own story".

The assessment type that the students commented on as being the most challenging was the text responses. For example, "My favourite part is writing text responses even though it was a challeng[e]", and "I found writing the text responses hard because English is not my first language but I want to improve my writing". Having fewer text responses was the most-suggested improvement. As a result, the development team will trial fewer text responses next semester and again seek student feedback.

Students gained consistently high grades on the first assessment task, the reading log collated on Pinterest. Students described it as 'fun', for example: "Pinterest! Because it is super easy and gave me flashbacks to my childhood stories". The development team attribute this to the accessible, interesting nature of the material, the familiarity of the media and the small-stakes nature of the assessment.

The assessment in which students showed greatest improvement was the text responses. The team attribute this to the staged nature of the tasks, the formative feedback after each submission and summative feedback after each module.

When we looked at all the feedback, some themes emerged: the value of creativity, challenge and social media as a research tool. Students valued the opportunity to be creative. Their work was diverse. Some drew on personal histories and produced work that was authentically connected to those of their people. They commented on how they enjoyed reconnecting with stories and rhymes from their childhoods.

Students also valued the challenge in tasks such as the close readings and the performance. Although it was effortful, they commented on the confidence they felt they gained in accomplishing the task. They said they thought the close reading had improved their reading and writing skills, and ability to give their opinion. In the performance, the efforts involved in working in a (diverse) group to produce a performance helped them get to know the other students and conquer their fears of public speaking.

Students endorsed the usefulness of an online social-media platform (Pinterest) in fostering wide reading, viewing and listening. Its ease of use helped hook students into frequent sourcing and collating of literature. Its accessibility contributed to students experiencing success early in the course.

An insight from our students was the high level of engagement in the creative work, especially when it was connected to their personal history and culture. The recollecting of childhood and self-reflection was meaningful as they grew in their identity as students. The reduction in the number of text responses was in part to allow for more time for the creative work students so valued. Our emphasis has been on fostering student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions. The strength of the students' response reminds us of the importance of student-to-self interactions in creative work, the work of being students and ultimately, artists, researchers and teachers.

Limitations in this study are that the number of participants was small (22), and the course has only run for one semester.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Greene suggests that the "purpose of education is to free persons to make sense of their actual lived situations – not only cognitively but also perceptually, imaginatively, affectively" (2001, p. 206).

Course development is a cyclic process and student responses are essential to development in all future initiatives. Designing the course using transition best-practice guidelines and the Ministry of Education's Te Whāriki as an underpinning resource has proven fruitful. Based on evaluation feedback, students endorse the basic structure and content of the course.

Students found the rhymes, stories and art highly engaging and accessible as projects. Attendance and success was very high. The strengths-based approach of valuing the diverse cultural capital brought by the students resulted in rich outputs, and including creative products and performances as coursework fostered collaboration and growth in confidence. The use of Pinterest as a research tool was endorsed by students, and contributed to high rates of participation and low-stakes early success.

The development team envisioned a course where students were at the centre of their learning in the co-creation of the Children's Literature course. Students were treated as experts of their own childhood and cultural stories, and in the pace of their learning, as in the rebalancing of academic demands to allow more time for the creative process. Creative self-reflection, through a sense of connection to forebears, helped strengthen students' sense of purpose and sense of capability (Lizzio, 2006).

As a development and teaching team, the collaboration has been professionally stimulating and enjoyable. The team has learned much from the students and this raises the question of how they can support dissemination of students' work. Additionally, the team finds itself in a community of practice, engaging instinctively in the spiral of inquiry (Timperley, Kaser, & Halbert, 2014) but this impact can be either positive or negative. Its power is frequently mentioned in articles about learning and teaching, but surprisingly few recent studies have systematically investigated its meaning. This article provides a conceptual analysis of feedback and reviews the evidence related to its impact on learning and achievement. This evidence shows that although feedback is among the major influences, the type of feedback and the way it is given can be differentially effective. A model of feedback is then proposed that identifies the particular properties and circumstances that make it effective, and some typically thorny issues are discussed, including the timing of feedback and the effects of positive and negative feedback. Finally, this analysis is used to suggest ways in

which feedback can be used to enhance its effectiveness in classrooms. (PsycINFO Database Record (c. Realising this affords the opportunity to pursue this cycle more intentionally, both for the benefit of the development team and of future students.

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APPENDIX A

Example of a student evaluation form for a module for Children's Literature:

Children's Literature

Module 2 – Stories for Children evaluation

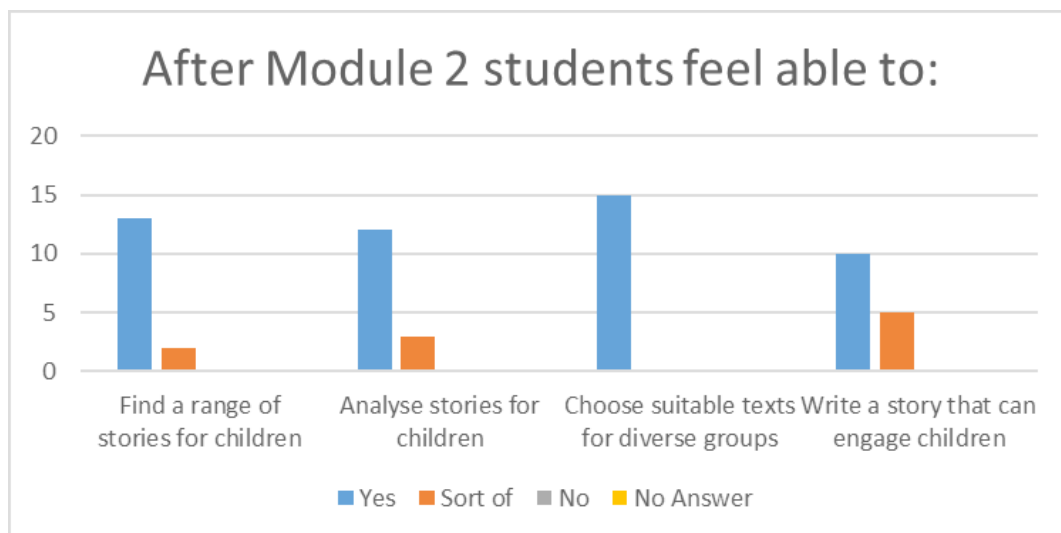
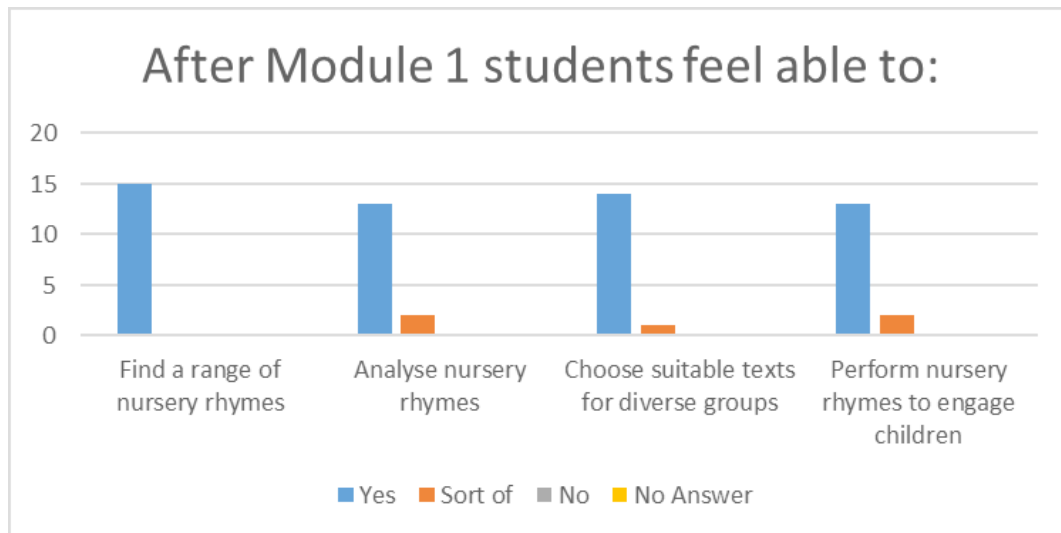
Reading so many children's stories helped me to understand the module better	Yes	Sort of	No
Reading so many children's stories helped improve my reading	Yes	Sort of	No
Writing text responses helped improve my ability to read critically	Yes	Sort of	No
Writing text responses helped improve my ability to write academically	Yes	Sort of	No
Writing a children's story helped me to understand them better	Yes	Sort of	No
Writing a children's story built up my confidence in writing	Yes	Sort of	No
Writing a children's story helped me to build up my confidence working with children	Yes	Sort of	No

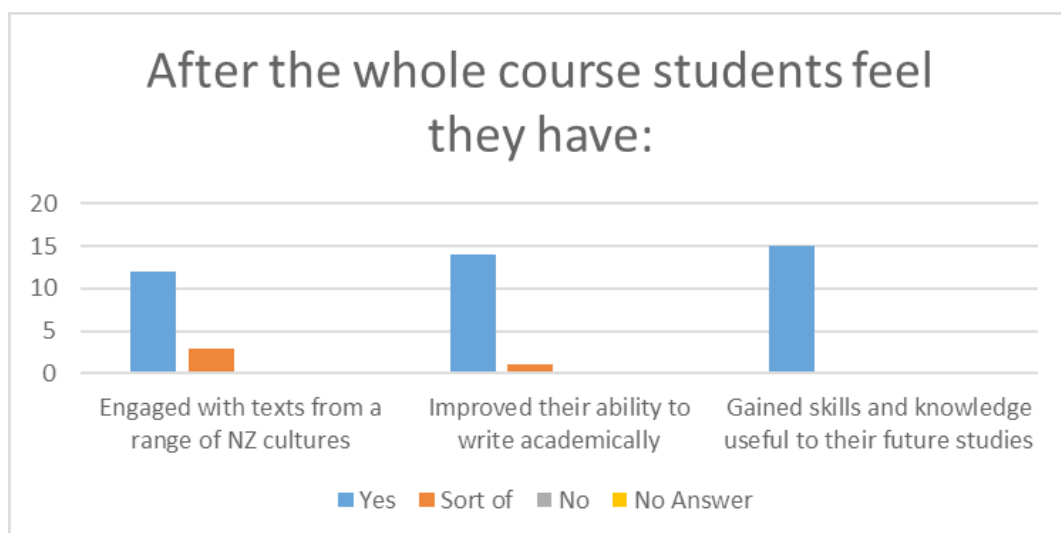
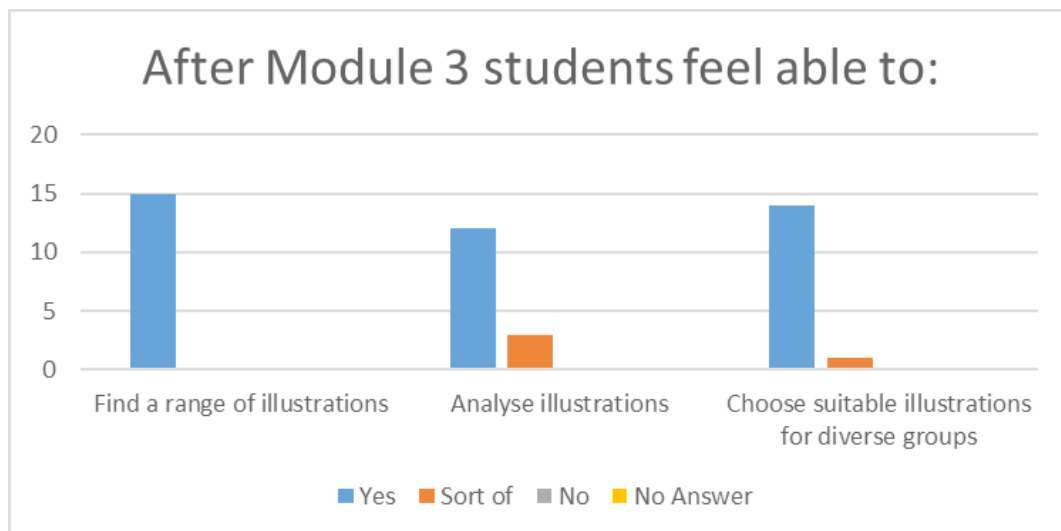
What was your favourite part of Module 2? Why?

What would you change/improve about Module 2? Why?

APPENDIX B

Tables showing results of student evaluations of each module and whole course:





APPENDIX C

Table showing examples of student responses (from 59 comments):

I enjoyed	
Learning the origins of nursery rhymes was something I found really interesting.	Writing my own story because I enjoy creative writing and children, it was really good to put it all together.
My favourite part was the text response, learning how to give my own opinion.	Writing my own story because I love being creative and using my own ideas.
Exploring different uses of colours and drawing style to illustrate my own story.	My favourite part of Module 1 was the performance part because I like working as a team because you get to understand what you're doing more.
Learning about a range of different literature and how to analyse it more.	Performance of the nursery rhymes because I got to build up my confidence as in the past I wasn't that good with performing in front of the people I don't know.

AUTHORS

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