

Different People — Different Literacies



Wanting to belong motivates you to learn!

Identity, belonging, language and learning

At some point in most of our lives we have had groups that we wanted to ‘belong’ to. Whether consciously or not, we tend to study and imitate those who already belong to the club – whether it’s a banner carrying activist; a leather clad bikey or a cyclist in lycra; we try to behave the way they do, dress the way they do, acquire the right accessories, learn the accepted language and, above all, act as if it all comes naturally.

Take on an identity

In short, when we want to ‘belong’ to a group we try very hard to learn how to belong, that is how to fit in and be accepted by the existing members of the group. Some people refer to this as trying to ‘take on an identity’. If young students are surrounded by friends and fellow students who seem at home ‘texting’ one another, then they are probably going to try and become one of them and take on a ‘texter’ identity. They are likely to purchase the phone, whatever seems the most popular at the time (not the one their parents think they should have because its cheaper) and quickly focus on learning to use it as their friends do: learning to ‘talk the talk’ of the texters. Similar learning takes place for those who want to enter the more specialist worlds of ‘Pokemon’ or ‘Dungeons and Dragons’.



Learn how to ‘talk the talk’

Clubs – identity – language

Think of a sport or hobby that you are into. Think of the rules and behaviours, both official and unofficial, that make up its special culture and how you learned them. In other words, how you took on the identity of a player or became a member of that group. For example, if you were to take up golf, there is an enormous number of rules to learn as well as acceptable behaviours – where to leave your buggy when playing a shot so you don’t get in the way of other people, when and where you can speak on the course, and how loudly is acceptable. There is also an enormous amount of special knowledge and language that golfers need to know. How do you learn all of this and why? You may have acquired it easily as you grew up in a golfing family, or like me, you may have to learn it later because you want to play the sport. It is wanting to play the sport that makes you put the effort into learning. And your new learning will be added to a whole collection of existing knowledge and languages (literacies) that you already bring to the golf lessons.



Different groups, Different identities, Different literacies

We have all probably taken on a number of different identities or learned to fit into a number of different groups in our lives: families, local cultures, political groups, hobby or sporting groups and the professional worlds in which we work. Sometimes, as we move from one group to another, we have to switch identities. We have to behave differently, wear different clothes and even use different language in order to fit in. The combination of knowledge, behaviours and language (the literacies) that we have acquired in the course of becoming part of these groups or taking on these identities, forms the unique person that each of us is now.



How does this relate to VET teaching?

There are two aspects that are useful to consider from this discussion. First, that learning within a VET program can be seen as taking on a new professional ‘identity’ in order to be accepted in the workplace, and along with it the specialist language and literacy that is part of that identity. Secondly, that it is good for us as VET teachers to remember that both teachers and students bring different identities, expertise and ‘literacies’ to any learning situation. It is probably a good idea to acknowledge this and to open up the possibility that the teacher and students can learn different things from one another as they go about the task of learning the specialist language of the vocational field.

Specialist language in VET

Every profession, trade or vocational area has its own specialist language and literacy. This includes particular terminology: special words, phrases, acronyms and even slang terms that make up the everyday talk of people in the field. Some people call it ‘jargon’, often in a derogatory tone which implies that it shouldn’t be used. However, the reality is that every profession and trade does use its own unique language. Literacy people tend to refer to the ‘discourse or specialist ‘register’ of the field (vocational area). Some also refer to ‘multiliteracies’ to highlight the range of ‘literacies’ needed for different occupations or pursuits. Part of introducing students to the new field is helping them to become literate in its specialist language. That means helping them to learn the meanings of new terms as well as the way in which they are commonly used when writing and speaking within the trade or profession.

Borrowed language – new meanings for old words

Often specialist language contains lots of terms from everyday English which are given entirely different meanings in the new language. For example, think about the first thing that comes to mind when you see the word ‘cookie’ (apart from the fact that this is another US addition to the universal English language). Then consider alternative meanings that it has in different professions. Whilst ‘a baker bakes cookies’ an IT technician could stop a cookie from being transmitted over the internet, and a photographer uses a cookie as an attachment on a light stand (ANTA 2002). If you think further into slang or colloquial expressions then you might also be familiar with the idea of a person who ‘has his hands in the cookie jar’ meaning that he is stealing from his organisation or team.

Try your own instinctive reaction to these examples: **volume**, **surfing**, **power**. Then compare your initial thoughts to the comments below.

‘Cookie’

One word many meanings

Volume: Whilst most people will relate to the sound switch on the TV, radio or CD player, and librarians might instantly conjure up part of a series of books, mathematics teachers always seem to assume that students instantly make the mental shift to their world in which volume is automatically the amount that a container can hold.



Surfing Your instinctive reaction to this term depends on the era you grew up in. To my mother 'surf' was a brand of soap powder. A few years ago 'surfing' would instantly conjure up images of a sport, (a fairly male dominated one) involving boards, wetsuits, vans, and a mysterious language of its own (with words like 'bombora' and 'pipeline', waves that were 'hairy' (which was good) or 'dumpers' (which were bad) and vehicles which were _____ wagons. These days many more people of all ages are 'surfing' the web, a phrase that was meaningless to most of us a mere decade ago.

Power Again it has many meaning according to your vocational field. In maths it is another word for an index as in '2 to the power 3 equals 8'. In science, engineering or mechanics it relates to energy generation, in sociology or politics it is about our ability to influence or control others. As well economists talk of 'purchasing power'.

Specialist meanings in different contexts

Consider the amount of borrowed language in this excerpt from a student's learning resource.

'a hard soldered type elbow or tee with an external nipple is silver brazed to the copper tube to provide a threaded water connection point'



Although a plumber might not give this sentence a second thought, others outside the trade (not members of the club) see a sentence loaded with familiar English language words which obviously must have specialist meanings in the particular context.

In this case we outsiders can probably guess the meanings, or at least some approximation, because we can assume visual similarities, but we still need to read it several times and certainly could not guarantee any confident understanding.

These kinds of words and phrases often act as barriers to learning for students. New terms that they don't understand can discourage learners from non English speaking backgrounds but also native English speakers who lack confidence in their ability (perhaps because of poor experiences in the school system). Specialist language that is not introduced gradually and given some focus within their regular learning (class teaching or written materials) can prevent them from understanding or even feeling a sense of belonging to their chosen vocational area.