



**Affording student choice and creative freedom -
teaching and learning coach Cathie Sutton concludes
“anything could happen.”**

My journey with *Inanimate Alice* began in 2011 when I was completing a Master of Literacy Leadership course at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia while concurrently teaching a Year 6 class at Roxburgh Homestead Primary School, some 50 kms to the north. At that time, the school had a program where each teacher remained with a class over a period of two years. Having taught this particular group of students the previous year, I moved with them into Year 6 having built strong relationships and gained a clear understanding of their future writing and reading goals.

A wide range of student ability was apparent in all areas of the curriculum. This was particularly noticeable in literacy where the differences were marked. Reflecting on their aptitudes in literacy, individual nuances and strengths, I imagined what the new year might look like, having decided at the end of their Year 5 journey that we needed to diversify and extend the planning of teaching and learning in literacy.

At the time, the school contained a 60+ computer resource lab and classes were rostered to participate in weekly ICT classes. Back then, the Australian curriculum was evolving to include more multimodal expectations within literacy pedagogy. A barrier to progress, transparently, was the difficulty in changing the mindsets of ‘digital immigrant’ teachers to include rich and challenging digital media in schools.

Conversations with the principal revolved around the possibilities of amending the school’s curriculum plan for literacy teaching and learning to include *Inanimate Alice* as the core text and central theme. With forethought, I was able to evidence that the curriculum statements we needed to assess against were easily adaptable in this new digital realm. Subsequently, I accessed the content and, using the provided teaching notes, I ensured that Alice was going to hit the mark for us and our kids according to our school’s ‘guaranteed and viable curriculum,’ (*What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Practice, Marzano, 2003*). The excitement for me as a teacher revolved around the endless inspirational possibilities of reimagining reading, writing, creating and analysing text in a way my students hadn’t previously experienced. The students were forewarned and eager. As an educator, I too was bursting at the seams!

We started with a prompt, ‘What is Sensory Input?’ For Alice to have the impact and rich learning opportunities I needed it to deliver, it required the collective unpacking of these new concepts in literacy, and those of the new literacies – ‘deciphering complex images and sounds as well as the

syntactical subtleties of words' (Lankshear, 2006). My students instantly engaged with this new direction in literacy learning, coming to it with a great deal of 'native' knowledge and opinion.

The power to teach a range of literacy devices, afforded by the series, lies in the rich conversation that surfaces following unpacking the imagery, text features and sounds - even more so, silence – that influences the reader's understanding of the storyline. This particular group of students were actively engaged with Alice from the get-go; interrogating her life experiences, what she might look like, her family situation, Brad, her culture and the culture of the places she travelled to, the subtly embedded social contexts woven throughout the storyline.

With the support of school leadership, we utilised the computer lab as often as we could for planning and writing and, therefore, I was able to encourage my students to experiment with programs and ideas and not necessarily be time-constrained. Forgoing the typical one-hour block of time gave students greater ownership of their final productions. Although this computer lab scenario worked for our group, I recognised that it isn't as effective as a model where students have access to technology at the time of creative thought or during a wave of ideas.

We worked on Alice over the span of a term and a half (around 15 weeks). The completed productions took longer than expected, and the engagement level was such that it would have been a huge disappointment to all had we stopped short at the holidays. Consequently, we allowed the creative flow to take its natural course. Some groups continued beyond the holidays while others moved on to new challenges and so a differentiated approach to literacy learning was necessary to ensure everyone continued to focus on the curriculum but at their own pace and with their own objectives. At the conclusion of the creative journey, we gave the students a chance to 'imagine' Alice, breathing life into her with each student creating a piece of art that showed Alice how they imagined her to be. This was fascinating as a social task and interesting to see how their own life experiences or interpretations of the story led to their individual creation of Alice's persona.

The presentation attached to this article reviews the results of my endeavours and conclusions reached. The production selected to demonstrate what is achievable through this process is entitled *Alice in Afghanistan*, the result of a collaboration between Luke, Burak and Sahashra. I shall hand it over to Luke, the writing prize winner in his graduation year, to explain what the experience has meant to him, almost a decade on, when he is now at university.

Being involved in Inanimate Alice was incredibly powerful for me as a child. Perhaps most importantly, it helped bolster my love of storytelling - a passion which persists to this day. Being an 11-year-old boy at the time, predictably I chose a war-torn setting. What appealed to me, especially as a child, about the format of Inanimate Alice was the freedom it allowed to choose my own setting and story within a larger framework, all while keeping true to the brief. Giving me the freedom to choose my own story was



instrumental in catching my interest and was much more effective than if I'd been given a set topic to write on. The versatility, I believe, of Inanimate Alice, is perhaps its greatest strength as a teaching tool for children, who value the ability to get creative with a project rather than work to a formula. Likewise, learning to create a sense of continuity between my story and the source material was valuable for me, as somebody with an interest in writing. Being given an opportunity with Inanimate Alice to indulge my love of video editing made the project doubly exciting. I imagine for a child with no pre-existing interest in storytelling or video editing, Inanimate Alice would be a fantastic introduction to both of these things. I distinctly remember the sense of accomplishment I felt after planning and editing the video with two of my good friends, which was also valuable in its own right. Ultimately, Inanimate Alice was a fantastic teaching tool for me personally and was instrumental in fostering the love of storytelling I have to this day. I like to hear that Inanimate Alice is still being used a decade later, as I believe it is a very valuable tool to engage kids with not only storytelling, but also teamwork and planning.

Luke

The unit was so powerful on many levels. The students felt empowered as writers – seeing ‘writing’ more as a collaborative path of creation and exploration than a previously held idea of words on paper having to tell every part of the story – nuanced as well as explicit. They found this process natural; they already had an intimate relationship with the tools needed for this form of story creation. They came to this learning with a rich knowledge of storytelling from the gaming world. Many were already movie makers, experimenting with short film creation using YouTube as their publisher. It was an overwhelmingly positive experience for students and staff; one I had hoped to recreate in the years following, so when I had the opportunity to revisit Alice years later within my role as Teaching and Learning coach, I jumped at the chance.

Currently, I’m working at a school within a different network, and since my previous experience with Alice, the Victorian Department of Education curriculum documents have been updated to broadly reflect multimodal aspects of Literacy teaching and learning; ‘creating texts’ and ‘responding to literature’ (*‘...choosing and experimenting with text structures, language features, images and digital resources appropriate to purpose and audience’*). Last year, I supported the year 5/6 team introducing multimodal literacies across a 10 week term, specifically unpacking the Alice program documents and teaching resources, matching Alice’s progression so that it complied with the Victorian Literacy Curriculum requirements for that year level. We spent an entire day of whole team planning, looking deeply at how each curriculum descriptor may be addressed within this digital story sequence. The documents were written in such a way that embedded content and concepts were interrogated throughout the term while leaving time for students, towards the end of term, to create their own episodes.

This latest experience with *Inanimate Alice* clearly demonstrated the need for continued support for digital immigrant teachers whose hesitance in using digital media in this context had previously hampered the progressive experiences that the digital natives desperately need. In particular, as those digital immigrant teachers navigate this ‘new normal’ in literacy teaching and learning, they will observe what is natural for our students and must pay close attention to their innate abilities to analyse and discuss technical aspects of digital texts. With my previous experience with this

material, my support role in this 'new normal' provides an essential bridge to the ongoing development of both students and our cohort of teachers who are navigating this process most likely for the first time.

Cathie Recommends

It could also be argued that there is a need for our universities to more deeply embed multimodal literacies into their course structures, particularly now, knowing how important this digital storytelling medium is to the future of students they will be teaching!

I would urge every teacher to become friends with Alice and her story, particularly if they are passionate about storytelling, 21st century citizenship, and individualised and collaborative education, all of which we find vital and necessary in education today! As I found through my own adventure in digital storytelling, by setting the scene and providing the appropriate support, anything could happen!



Cathie Sutton