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Please cite this paper as:

Adam, R. J. (2010). *The design and implementation of a first year literacy initiative for pre-service teachers: A preliminary review*. Refereed paper presented at 'Teacher education for a sustainable future', the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Townsville, 4–7 July.

Published by: Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA)

Available via stable URL: https://atea.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2010_adam.pdf

Review status: Refereed—abstract and full paper blind peer-reviewed

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The Design and Implementation of a First Year Literacy Initiative for Pre-service Teachers: A Preliminary Review

Raoul J. Adam

James Cook University

Abstract

This paper provides a description and preliminary review of the design and implementation of the First Year Literacy Initiative (FYLI) in the School of Education at James Cook University. The FYLI represents a coordinated attempt to improve the academic literacy of first year pre-service teachers. It is an evolving response to national calls for greater participation in higher education for students from rural, regional, low-socioeconomic, and Indigenous backgrounds (Bradley, 2008), and state calls for greater attention to the literacy training and testing of pre-service teachers (Masters, 2009). Preliminary results from a pilot study of the FYLI reinforce the value of a cyclic, coordinated, contextualised and connected, sustainable, and adaptable approach to literacy learning in a tertiary context.

Keywords: academic literacy, teacher education

Overview

The First Year Literacy Initiative (FYLI) represents the pilot phase of an ongoing literacy project in the School of Education at James Cook University (JCU). Specifically, the FYLI involves the design, implementation, and review of a coordinated approach to academic literacy learning including a 34-page literacy guide, two diagnostic literacy tests, a formative online test bank, a literacy assessment rubric, literacy lecture segments, writing workshops, group literacy support sessions, and individualised literacy tutorials. The FYLI's core emphases on academic literacy are organised using eleven modules including *Vocabulary, Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation, Style, Structure, Referencing, Reading Comprehension, Critical Reasoning, ICTs, and Examinations*. Finally, as an action research project, the FYLI pilot involves tests and surveys, online tracking of resource use, interviews, focus groups, and data collection from assignment grades and diagnostic tests.

The FYLI has been designed and developed through collaborations between lecturers, learning support staff, teachers, and pre-service teachers. The design and implementation of the FYLI was initiated by a small faculty grant and the designation of 150 hours for first year coordination. Interfaculty literacy funding has been secured for the second semester of the pilot of the FYLI in order to encourage more collaborative development and application beyond the School of Education. The implementation and development of the ongoing pilot project involves a cohort of first year pre-service teachers ($N = 150$) enrolled in two core subjects of the education degree: *Foundations of Education* and *Foundations of*

Educational Technologies. The action research component of the FYLI involves a sub-section of these first year students ($n = 100$) based on their informed consent to participate in the research. The following sections provide a context for the FYLI, an overview of core design principles, examples of implementation, and a preliminary review of challenges and opportunities arising from the pilot phase of the project.

Context

The FYLI is part of a broader response to national and state concerns about the literacy of pre-service teachers. At a national level, concerns over literacy in the school and tertiary sectors have been expressed by successive governments through the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Nelson, 2005) and the literacy agenda of the 'Education Revolution' (Gillard, 2010). At a state level, the Masters Review (2009) on literacy and numeracy in Queensland schools details the causes of literacy problems and notes the formative influence of pre-service teacher education programs on the quality of teachers' literacy. The first recommendation of the Queensland Government's (2009) response to the Masters Review is that primary teachers demonstrate literacy proficiency through testing. Within this national context, the FYLI seeks to raise pre-service teacher awareness, accountability, and most importantly, support, for the development of basic academic literacy with a view to extending the initiative in later years to encompass school-based literacy.

JCU is a regional university that represents a significant number of students from low-socioeconomic, disadvantaged, and Indigenous backgrounds. The School of Education at JCU plays an important part in the two-way relationship between teacher literacy and student literacy in the region of North Queensland. The challenge and opportunity for the FYLI is to coordinate the need for quality teachers of literacy in regional areas (Pegg and Panizzon, 2007) with the national recommendation of the Bradley Review (2008) to include "those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas" (p. xi) in higher education. The fundamental need for 'literate' teachers of literacy is compatible with JCU's generic undergraduate attributes, including:

- the ability to read complex and demanding texts accurately, critically and insightfully, and
- the ability to speak and write clearly, coherently and creatively.

The prioritisation of literacy in teacher education makes further sense in light of national policy documents highlighting the importance of communication skills in an increasingly knowledge-based economy and society (e.g. Review Committee on Higher Education Financing and Policy, 1997). The aim of the FYLI is to provide support and accountability for literacy learning and teaching in a regional university context. The following section outlines the general principles of design that inform the literacy initiative.

Design

The FYLI represents a cyclic, coordinated, contextualised and connected, sustainable, and adaptable approach to literacy training and teaching. These design principles and their specific applications in FYLI materials emerged from (i) a top-down online review of existing approaches (i.e. approaches to academic literacy at similar regional universities like University of New England and Southern Cross University) and (ii) a bottom-up review of literacy gaps and approaches involving existing staff and students in the JCU School of Education.

The overall design of the initiative balances instructional approaches to literacy that emphasise the imparting of knowledge, with ‘dialogical approaches’ to literacy (e.g. Chanock, D’Cruz, and Bisset, 2009) that emphasise the construction of knowledge through engaged conversation in context. While the pilot implementation of the FYLI focuses on academic literacy, its guiding literacy concept encompasses traditional emphases on reading and writing written texts and modern emphases on multimodal texts, multiple literacies, new literacies, and critical literacy. For example, the inclusion of an ICT module recognises the increasing importance of competence in reading, writing, and communicating with electronic media. The inclusion of the critical reasoning module recognises the importance of critical literacies for navigating increasingly knowledge-based environments with ever-diversifying discourses. In the context of teacher education, the literacy construct of the FYLI is consonant with the National English Curriculum’s recognition of multimodal texts (National Curriculum Board, 2008, p. 12), Luke and Freebody’s (1990) Four Resources Model, and Green’s (1988) Three Dimensions of Literacy Model, all of which acknowledge traditional ‘operational’ literacies alongside modern multimodal and critical literacies. Summarily, the FYLI promotes an encompassing approach to literacy that is evident in the range of its literacy modules and in its use of instructional and dialogical approaches to literacy learning.

Cyclic Approach

The FYLI is structured and administered using a cycle of literacy learning (Figure 1) based on (i) awareness, (ii) diagnosis (iii) support, and (iv) accountability.

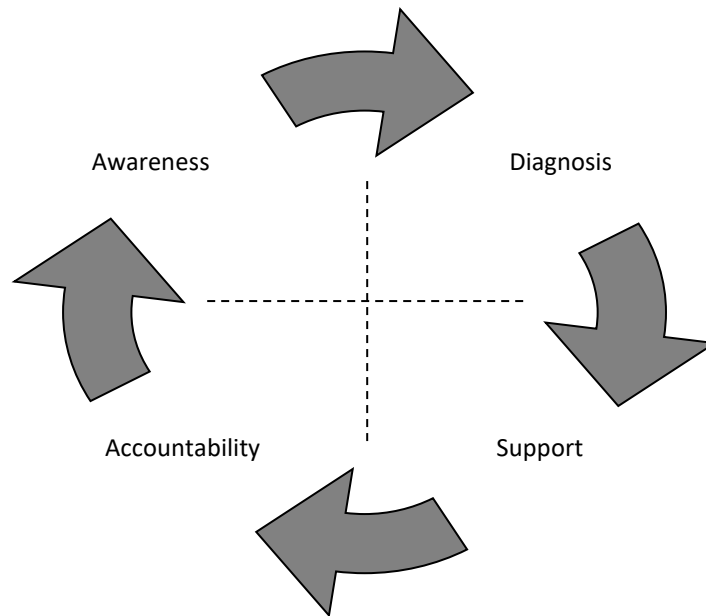


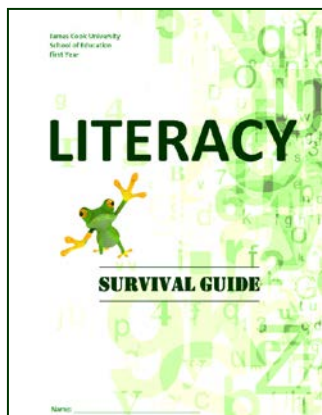
Figure 1. Cycle of Literacy Learning

The cyclic metaphor represents the sequencing, interconnectedness, and continuity of the literacy learning process. *Awareness* recognises the importance of helping students to centralise and rationalise a place for literacy learning across curriculum and discipline subjects. Awareness foregrounds the inextricable link between literacy skills and subject engagement. Literacy awareness is embedded in the

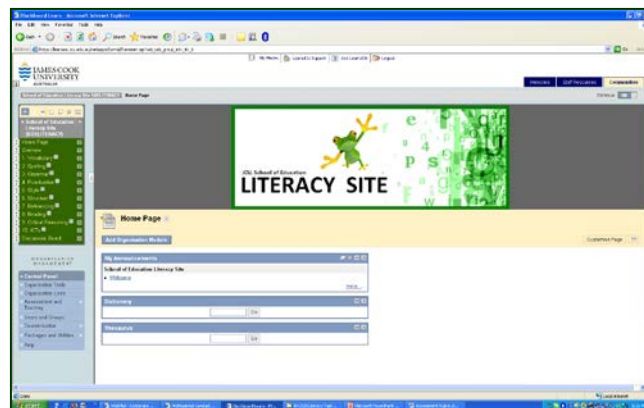
FYLI through a general orientation segment for first year students, regular literacy segments during lectures, and the use of reflective literacy tasks and dialogues during individual and small-group support sessions. *Diagnosis* involves the identification of literacy needs in a given cohort of students. Accurate diagnosis of literacy needs enables more strategic and meaningful literacy support. Diagnosis in the FYLI is an ongoing process involving entry-point diagnostic tests and collection of data from subject assessment. *Support* recognises the need for human and material resources to facilitate and motivate literacy learning. Support embedded in the FYLI involves a literacy guide and online resources, formative online literacy tests, workshops, tutorials, lecture segments, assessment feedback, and small-group support sessions. *Accountability* involves the provision of choices and consequences to motivate students' use of support resources. Accountability mechanisms are embedded into the FYLI with the use of a literacy assessment rubric which enables markers to use literacy as a discriminating criterion linked to student take-up of literacy support. The cycle continues when accountability mechanisms bring literacy problems and solutions back into student awareness. Successive cycles revisit literacy in increasing detail in order to pace and scaffold learning along the continuum from novice to expert.

Coordinated Approach

The FYLI offers a coordinated approach to literacy in order to facilitate general literacy awareness and to facilitate student understanding of, and participation in, literacy learning. The coordination is achieved through organisational alignment between literacy support, and accountability resources. For example, the *Literacy Survival Guide* and the *Literacy Assessment Rubric* are both organised around the eleven literacy modules (e.g. Punctuation, Spelling, Style, Critical Reasoning etc.). Furthermore, the parts of the FYLI are graphically coordinated with a standard logo and colour scheme (Figure 2).



(a) Literacy Guide



(b) Literacy Community Site

Figure 2. Coordination of FYLI parts through common design

This coordination through common graphic design and common language around the 'FYLI' is intended to raise student awareness of literacy rather than constrain and regulate the fluid concept of literacy.

Contextualised and Connected Approach

The FYLI is deliberately designed to connect general academic literacy to students' lives in local contexts. 'Connectedness' recognises the "relationship between the home, school, and community, as well as between the curriculum and students' real life situations" (Zyngier, 2006, p.1). The need for pedagogies that connect with students' life experiences is increasingly recognised by researchers and theorists in education (e.g. Lingard, 2001). This need for connectedness is succinctly described by Culican, Emmitt, and Oakley (2001) in the context of literacy learning: "For learning to be effective, it needs to engage with student subjectivities and to connect with the world" (p. 88). The FYLI encourages students to learn literacy by generating and exploring their own literacy narratives and reflecting on the valuing and contestation of literacies in the teaching profession. For example, the extended piece of writing in one of the diagnostic literacy tests requires students to reflect on the current debate surround mandatory literacy testing for pre-service teachers. The other diagnostic literacy test uses literacy-related stimulus including an abstract from a paper on the cultural politics of literacy learning. A follow-up survey encourages students to describe and reflect on their affective responses to the diagnostic literacy testing and related performance. Student responses from this survey begin to reveal the complex stories and rich diversity of life experiences behind students' confidence and anxiety surrounding literacy testing and learning. Illustratively, one student reflected:

In response to the Literacy test, I felt quite anxious and agitated. I am sure that this has relevance to my past experiences. I wanted to go to University in England but felt that I did not have the financial and emotional support from my family. Secondly, the subjects I was streamlined into were not ones that I wanted to be engaged in or evoked my interests. Subsequently, I did not finish Year 12 and entered the workforce in a variety of professions. I believe that the lack of confidence and sense of not being educated enough was added to by some of the work organisations. I know I do have the abilities, but I have been somehow constrained by my past experiences.

The first exercise in the literacy workbook also encouraged students to reflect on the life construction and development of their own literacies. One student in an individualised support tutorial reflected on his self-fulfilment of low literacy teacher expectations related to his Indigenous identity. He reflected on his struggle to see his own literacies (e.g. fluency in Indigenous languages) as equally valid to academic literacies, in different contexts.

The FYLI also encourages connectedness by embedding general academic literacy in a local context. For example, the *Literacy Survival Guide* is localised with a collective welcome from lecturing staff with accompanying profiles. The guide also contains literacy learning advice from past first year students. The graphic logo on FYLI resources features a frog (a local symbol) and FYLI text resources are linked with a common graphic theme. Collectively, these strategies help students to engage literacy learning in a local context, recognising the relative value of different literacies in order to appreciate the place and time for the learning of academic literacies. As a pedagogical approach, connected and contextualised literacies help students to learn by navigating between the general and the particular, without valuing or devaluing, a priori, the forms of literacy they bring to university.

Sustainable Approach

A sustainable approach refers to the usability of the FYLI over time. Programs that rely heavily on intermittent funding and individual staff knowledge and expertise tend to be difficult to sustain in successive years when funding runs out, staff move on, and administrative priorities change. The FYLI is designed to minimise these problems. It does not rely on potentially expensive external testing, though it can be complemented by such testing. Staff and student collaborations are used to generate resources (e.g. *Literacy Survival Guide* and diagnostic tests) that can be sustained throughout staff turn-

over. Staff time commitments can be compensated and encouraged by involvement in research output because the FYLI is designed as an action research project. For example, sub-projects of the FYLI were generated through individual staff interest and expertise in topics such as literacy narratives, the conceptualisation of academic literacy, and literacy assessment feedback. Consequently, the action research dimension of the FYLI encourages staff and student involvement through ongoing participation and ownership in the initiative's development. This helps to sustain the FYLI when other top-down administered approaches may alienate staff and students alike. The sustainable design of the FYLI encourages its implementation by encouraging participation in its ongoing development. The challenge is for individual staff to find new opportunities for research that perpetuate the adaptation of the initiative through student engagement.

Adaptable Approach

The action research dimension of the FYLI ensures that it is evolving and adaptable. A general action research cycle (e.g. design, implementation, review, and refinement) also encourages the conscious evolution of the resources and organisation of the FYLI. For example, student and staff feedback on the diagnostic testing informs changes to the design and administration of the tests. Likewise, student take-up of literacy support informs changes to the mechanisms encouraging take-up and the quality and relevance of support. For example, one lecturer administered an assessment follow-up survey to collect data on the use of the literacy guide. Approximately thirty percent of students ($n = 30/98$) had directly referred to the guide in the construction and editing of their assignments. This survey was a strategy to further encourage awareness and use of the guide. As a general design principle, the adaptability of the FYLI through action research enables recognition and redress of the initiative's implicit and emerging weaknesses.

There is a paradoxical separation and synthesis between the structure and content of the FYLI that enables its adaptation in other schools and disciplines. The general structure and format of the FYLI (e.g. literacy guide, assessment rubric, and formative online tests) can be populated with discipline-specific content. For example, the education-specific vocabulary in Module 1 of the *Literacy Survival Guide* could be replaced with a vocabulary more relevant to Nursing or Biological Science. The APA referencing conventions outlined in Module 7 of the guide could be replaced with a different style relevant to a different discipline. However, the structure of the FYLI remains transferrable and workable in different contexts. In a meta-sense, the FYLI's emphasis on 'content' and context is an important part of its design 'structure'.

Implementation

The FYLI pilot was implemented in four phases which loosely follow the four parts of the organisational cycle described previously (see Figure 1). The *awareness phase* involved a short introduction and multimedia presentation during a core lecture early in the first semester. The presentation outlined the core elements of the FYLI and provided a context and rationale for its implementation. The presentation emphasised (i) the link between academic literacy, core subjects, and the teaching profession, (ii) the balance between literacy support and accountability that characterises the FYLI, (iii) the opportunity for participation in research to develop the FYLI, (iv) the contextuality of academic literacy, and (v) the current political focus on pre-service teacher literacy. For example, the presentation was initiated with a discussion of a recent newspaper article (Chilcott, June 1, 2009) on teacher literacy, titled *Universities failing our teachers*. In a follow-up tutorial students were provided with information and consent forms for participation in the action research of the FYLI.

The *diagnostic phase* of the FYLI was initiated with two forty-minute literacy tests. These tests were analysed using a bell-curve to identify a group of students ($n = 30$) requiring individual literacy support. This data was cross-checked with grade data from the initial pieces of written assessment to confirm and identify students requiring support. Cross-checking revealed a correlation between student performance in the diagnostic tests and student performance in subject assessment.

The *support phase* of the FYLI was implemented with the distribution of an electronic copy and hardcopy of the *Literacy Survival Guide* including inserts advertising generic writing workshops and learning skills sessions offered by the teaching and learning division of the university. On the basis of diagnostic data, open literacy support sessions and invitational literacy support sessions were offered to students. Students were also encouraged to use self-paced online literacy tests for formative support. Take-up strategies were revised to improve awareness of the tests and test formatting after tracking revealed low rates of use ($n = 22/150$). Literacy lecture segments also provided support and were delivered throughout the semester in the subject - *Foundations of Educational Technologies* (see Jackson, Taylor, and Adam, 2010 forthcoming). In the second core subject, *Foundations of Education*, a student survey related to an early assessment piece was used to collect data on student awareness and use of literacy support resources (see Taylor, Jackson, and Adam, 2010 forthcoming).

The *accountability phase* of the FYLI was implemented through the use of the *Literacy Assessment Rubric* in the first major pieces of assessment. Literacy criteria were graded using an independent marker to emphasise the literacy focus and to provide students with comprehensive literacy feedback. The rubric is aligned to the FYLI modules. It provides markers the opportunity to assign a 'provisional grade' and 'possible grade' where movement depends on the take-up of specific literacy support. For example, where poor literacy performance resulted in subject failure, some students were offered individualised literacy support sessions organised around a workbook of literacy tasks to either pass the subject or be given an opportunity to repeat the subject. Tracking of student performance and take-up of the accountability options provided data to continue the action research cycle and refine the design and implementation of the FYLI. Preliminary results suggest that students are most likely to take-up literacy support where the movement from provisional to possible grades is either (i) across a whole grade (e.g. from a Credit to a Distinction) or, (ii) expressed numerically in a subject with cumulative points (e.g. from 60% to 65%). This is most likely because final subject grades do not differentiate with a grade (e.g. C-, C, C+) such that achievement of the possible grade would not change the overall subject grade. The return of the assessment rubric after a major piece of written assessment was to regenerate the literacy cycle by reemphasising or refocusing student awareness of academic literacy issues.

Review

This section offers some broad preliminary reflections on the design of the FYLI in light of its implementation through the pilot project. More detailed observations and discussion of the implementation and effectiveness of the FYLI from a lecturer's perspective are presented in Jackson, Taylor and Adam (2010, forthcoming), and Taylor, Jackson, and Adam (2010, forthcoming). The key affirmations of the FYLI concern the importance of contextualising and connecting literacy to students' life-worlds, individualising support, and having an accountability mechanism for student use of support. Students who are encouraged to understand literacy as an integral part of their access to life experiences, rather than a short term annoyance to pass an education degree, are more likely to be effective teachers of literacy in later years. The pilot of the FYLI raises some practical and conceptual challenges in the achievement of this understanding and improvement of academic literacy. The

following reflections concern the conceptualisation, implementation, student take-up, and resourcing of the FYLI.

Conceptualisation issues concern the philosophical positioning of the FYLI. The FYLI attempted to coordinate positions that emphasised either (i) narrow or expansive definitions of literacy, (ii) student or staff responsibility for literacy learning, (iii) screening or supportive uses of diagnostic testing, (iv) localised or standardised literacy knowledge, and (v) extrinsic or intrinsic approaches to literacy learning. Many of the early discussions around the conceptualisation of the FYLI related to concerns that the initiative would be characterised by favouring or neglect of one or the other pole of these binaries. For example, in the context of an education degree, some staff favoured early diagnosis for screening purposes with literacy as a discriminating criterion; others supported a more formative and flexible approach to literacy learning that placed responsibility for ongoing student support and development with the university. The compromise characterising the FYLI involved the use of the assessment rubric that puts the onus for support on the university, and the onus for take-up of support on the student, with provision for literacy to be used as a discriminating criterion for those students who fail to take up support offered. In hindsight, the coordination of these binaries and avoidance of extremes was an important consideration in the development of a sustainable approach to literacy learning.

Implementation issues concerning timetabling, student reception, funding, and research participation arose throughout the pilot project. Timetabling considerations involved negotiation of time for literacy-focussed lecture segments in core first year subjects. Lecturers sometimes found it difficult to integrate literacy segments and support with limited resources and expertise. While the literacy guide provided a useful focal point, lecturer reflection suggests the use of an accompanying workbook or exercises could be helpful. This could minimise unnecessary repetition of literacy knowledge between core subjects while still allowing the contextualisation of literacy knowledge within core subjects. There is a saturation factor or risk of over-familiarisation that can be counterproductive to student learning if literacy learning across subjects is merely repetitive rather than coordinated and reinforced. In the context of teacher education, lecturers also emphasised the value of aiding student learning by encouraging them to consider and practise pedagogies for the teaching of the literacy knowledge. This helped to alleviate the problem of a 'one size fits all' approach that alienates students who are already competent with academic literacy. Lecturer observations suggest that these students can be reengaged by involving them in the construction of pedagogies for literacy learning.

Another implementation concern arising from the student reception of the FYLI involved test anxiety in relation to the measurement of literacy performance. Students were given the opportunity to reflect on this immediately after the diagnostic testing. Responses reveal the importance of contextualising and rationalising literacy testing to reduce non-productive anxiety. For example, one student noted:

I was very anxious. I felt I was put on the spot, especially because I felt really overwhelmed in my first few weeks at university anyway. After completing the test I left and felt as if I wanted to give up university altogether. I felt dumb and that I was not going to make it. I think this was because I felt really overwhelmed, I knew I did not do very good at the test.

Significantly, this student's test result was in the top twenty percent of the cohort and she was not identified in the sub-group requiring individualised support. The relativity of anxiety and self-performance predictions are considerations for how testing is contextualised and received by students.

The formalisation through testing was found to be useful in raising the profile of the FYLI and the prioritising of literacy in student assessment. Student feedback on the diagnostic tests also revealed the formative power of diagnostic testing. For example, one student wrote:

That was a pretty interesting test. I'm not sure I did that well, but I didn't feel stressed or anything. It reminded me of pop-quiz's (sic) in High School, I loved it! I learnt from my English teacher last year that simply because you don't do very well on something, it isn't necessarily a bad thing. It gives you an incentive to learn so that you don't make those mistakes again!

The tests, which were structured in alignment with the literacy modules, helped to frame the literacy knowledge and discourses emphasised in the FYLI early in the implementation.

Key funding concerns to sustain the FYLI involved marking time and publication costs for the *Literacy Survival Guide*. Design and delivery time for the pilot initiative were subsumed in staff teaching workload and supported by a small internal grant. However, funding of qualified markers to assess and track student performance and printing costs for student resources emerged as fundamental expenses. Staff involvement through the action research dimension of the FYLI assisted its ownership and related development. Thus, some cost for the development of the initiative was absorbed into staff research workload with the incentive for generation of related data and subsequent publication.

Resource issues primarily concerned the development of the *Literacy Survival Guide* and related diagnostic tests. Staff and student feedback on the guide contributed to revisions, omissions, and inclusions for a more relevant and effective resource. Solicited feedback resulted in revisions to the literacy guide. These revisions included everything from the updating of sixth edition APA referencing conventions to the horizontal reorientation and colouration of the frog's pupils in the FYLI logo. More broadly, consideration of these concerns and issues has enabled refinement of the structure, resources, and process that constitute the FYLI. The process of review and refinement will continue throughout the second semester pilot.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a broad description and preliminary review of a literacy initiative for first year pre-service teachers in the School of Education at James Cook University. General design principles of the FYLI emphasised the importance of a cyclic, coordinated, contextualised and connected, sustainable, and adaptable approach. Early lessons learned through the design and implementation of the FYLI perhaps apply to all authentic teaching and learning. Literacy learning, like any learning, takes place in-context and requires meaning-making and connectedness relevant to the life-world of individual learners. This recognition provides a pedagogical way forward for improving the literacy outcomes of pre-service teachers who will, in turn, affect the literacy outcomes of their school students. Our experiences with the FYLI pilot offer a note of caution in the current climate of literacy testing for pre-service teachers and school students. Literacy testing *is* a life experience that contributes to students' constructions of a narrative of competence or incompetence around literacy. Literacy testing and training that is divorced from the local contexts and literacy narratives of individual students, or from coordinated support, can be counterproductive. Accordingly, the most generalisable design principle of the FYLI is the need for strategies and pedagogies that can connect general academic literacy to the experiences and situations of individual students.

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