SPECULATIVE FICTION:
A genre study using inquiry based learning to improve imaginative writing in Stage 4 English
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I had first trialled inquiry based learning in our current English programs by isolating a sequence of lessons that could easily be adapted to include a research element. This was successful with a Year 7 program which focused on the ways texts position us to a certain point of view on an issue. The success of this inquiry based learning project led me to consider how I could also use this framework to improve creative writing in Stage 4.

The design of the Year 8: Imaginative Worlds program was developed out of a desire to deeply engage my students in student centred, blended learning experiences that would nurture the growth of their creative writing skills. I also wanted students to be able to continue their learning experiences throughout the day, evening and over a number of weeks. To achieve this, I knew I would need to include a variety of digital literacy resources and activities within a popular culture genre, which was of high interest to my students.

I began by reading Guided Inquiry Design: A framework for Inquiry in Your School (2012 Kuhlthau, Maniotes, Caspari). This book is a fabulous resource for those wishing to begin the process of Inquiry in a classroom as it clearly and concisely outlines each of the processes within the framework, includes model lesson plans, and printable worksheets. The authors suggest the following stages of learning:

Open: introduce the topic in a way that stimulates curiosity and engages students
Immerse: build background knowledge and vocabulary to help students to connect to topic
Explore: students start to do their own research to know the field and what they want to do; be prepared to intervene individually as this is the difficult stage when students realise they cannot manage the depth and breadth of material
Identify: students identify their own question for research. This must be expressed as a question and not a topic
Gather: students gather information that relates to their question; they should cross check this with a few sources
Create: students find ways to communicate their answer

Share: students learn from each other and hearing what they are doing
Evaluate: students consider if they have reached their learning goals

I seized the opportunity of the change to the new NSW syllabus for the Australian Curriculum work to with our Teacher Librarian and write a Year 8 program called, Imaginary Worlds which was based on the GID framework. This unit was an eight-week unit designed to immerse the students in the Speculative Fiction genre and five selected sub-genres. The aim of the unit was to have students enrich their knowledge of the genre as well as compose their own narratives encompassing all the elements found with the chosen sub-genre. This story was used as a formal assessment task. Students were also required to keep a writing journal as they worked through the unit. This was collected at the completion of the course to inform their class based assessment grade.

A Moodle page was curated and designed by our Teacher Librarian and this became our online learning tool for the unit. This blended teaching and learning resource allowed teachers and students to access shared and collaborative resources at any stage of the course. Students could even continue to immerse themselves in the literature outside of school times via the school portal. The hope was to have learning and creativity stretch beyond the constraints of a 60 minute classroom lesson.

The first step was to explain the purpose and process of the unit to the students as well as show them around the Moodle page. This included a run through of the purpose and use of the ‘Writing Journal’ students would be using as their workbook for the unit. Inquiry journals are an integral tool used by the students to compose and reflect throughout the Inquiry process.1 The journal documents the students’ research into their chosen genre and time is set aside for students to reflect on what they have gathered throughout the Inquiry. For this unit, students used their journals to build their speculative fiction narrative. Writing activities which helped

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them to compose aspects of their story were included as well as opportunities to design and compose visuals to support their story. Some of these included designing a map of their dystopian world or composing and labelling characters and props such as weapons or spaceships. Students displayed an authentic sense of ownership and pride in their journals and we decided that as well as their completed stories, students would share their journals with each other during the Share phase of the Inquiry.

The next step was to OPEN the students to the line of Inquiry. The main purpose of the OPEN stage is to stimulate their interest and inspire them to continue to pursue a more thorough investigation into the sub-genres. This stage was broken down into three lessons. The first lesson was used to open students up to the possibility of ‘imaginative worlds’ and the speculative fiction genre. Students were also introduced to the Inquiry question for the unit which was, “How can we use our knowledge of the genre to write our own narrative?”

The following sequence of lesson plans follow the GIDF and guides students through a deep exploration of the creative writing process.

THE OPEN STAGE
ACTIVITY 1: Students view a news report via YouTube on the recent discovery of planet Kepler 452b. Students then complete a Think, Share, Pair activity in which they brainstorm ideas in response to the following guided questions:
Imagine what life will be like on this new planet. Brainstorm ideas in response to the following questions.
1. What would it look like?
2. What would our daily life involve?
3. Will there be any other life apart from humans on the planet?

ACTIVITY 2: Share your ideas with a partner and add any you really enjoyed to your own list. As a class, share your favourite idea to the group and continue to add any you enjoy to your own list.

WRITING ACTIVITIES FOR THE OPEN STAGE:
Teachers may choose to have students complete one or all of the following writing activities.

ACTIVITY 3: Write a 10-12 line diary entry as yourself on Earth 2.0 (Kepler 452b). Ensure you make reference to the scientific and futuristic advancements on this planet.

ACTIVITY 4: Design a timetable for a day at school on your future planet. Think about the subjects you will study, time spent at school, new technologies you will use or learn about and the languages spoken on this world.

ACTIVITY 5: Students design and create a magazine cover from their future world. Consider the target audience of the magazine and the types of articles which would be found inside a futuristic magazine. Consider future sports, fashion, foods, activities, technologies, movies…etc.

Activity 6: Library visit. Students visit the library and are involved in speed reading circles. For this, I contacted the Teacher Librarians and asked if they could set up tables of books and short stories for each of the following genres: Dystopic, Sci-Fi, Cyberpunk, Steampunk and Fantasy. Students spent 10-12 min at each table, immersing themselves in the genres and getting a ‘feel’ for the fiction. Before moving on, each student completed a quick reflection task in which they answered the following questions in their writing journal:
1. What did you enjoy about the stories you looked at?
2. What aspects of the texts did not engage you?
3. Do you think you would like to return and explore more stories within this genre?
4. Overall, what is your first impression of the speculative fiction sub-genres?

THE IMMERSE STAGE
During this stage, students immersed themselves more deeply into the genres within speculative fiction. A variety of resources from the School’s Literary Reference Centre, websites and examples of short stories were available for students to peruse both on the Moodle page and in classrooms. To

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begin, students firstly identified the definition of each of the genres and recorded their findings in their Writing Journals. A range of Guided Inquiry worksheets were provided for students to record and reference the sites they visited and resources they used. This included the Stop and Jot and Inquiry Log worksheets (see Figure: 6.1, 8.2 in the GIDF textbook). At the conclusion of the IMMERSE phase, students completed the Inquiry Journal prompts sheet (see Figure: 5.1 in the GIDF textbook) and recorded their initial thoughts and findings in their Writing Journal. For each of the genres, a discussion forum was added to the Moodle page to allow students to post initial thoughts, ideas, questions and reflections onto a shared platform.

THE EXPLORE STAGE
In this stage students began to research their chosen genre in more depth. This involved the students deciding on a particular sub- genre within speculative fiction and browsing a variety of sources available on the Moodle page. I allowed two lessons for this process and my job was to provide suggestions on how to choose interesting and worthwhile resources and information to explore the genre. The purpose of this phase is to have students inquiring more deeply into the genre; its conventions and its historical development. Students also read and respond to a range of short stories within this genre and they are encouraged to borrow and read at least one novel. A complete list of the resources used for this unit is available at the end of the article.

As students continue through the Explore stage, they are encouraged at the end of each lesson to post a comment or question on the discussion forum and wiki page. They also continue to fill in the Stop and Jot and Journal prompt worksheets. Each day, students had to reflect on their learning in their writing journal, taking note of what they had discovered about the genre from their research or from the stories they had explored. I allowed three lessons for this phase.

THE IDENTIFY STAGE
The main task during the Identify phase is to construct an inquiry question (or for this task, a set of inquiry questions). These questions framed the rest of the inquiry into their chosen genre and reflected the type of information they would need to gather to be able to write a narrative within their chosen sub- genre.

During this stage students were asked to complete an adapted version of the KWL chart. They needed to identify what they had learned from their research into the genre, what they still needed to find out to complete the assessment task and then devise a plan on how they would best find this information out. Students established three Inquiry questions which then directed their research. I allowed students two lessons to research and gather the answers they needed. At the end of each lesson, students were asked to complete their worksheets (stop and jot, journal prompts) and contribute any findings to the discussion forum. See figure 7.5, Chart to identify or 7.6, Taskcard for Identify in the GIDF textbook for workable tools to help students plan their Inquiry.3

Some examples of Inquiry questions the students devised were:
1. What are the conventions of my chosen genre?
2. What are the rules governing the worlds within this genre?
3. What are the types of themes explored within the texts of this genre?
4. What sort of structures can I use?
5. What types of characters appear in this genre?
6. What types of scientific or technological advancements appear in these types of stories?

THE GATHER STAGE
The gather phase is designed as a time of comprehensive searching that encompasses locating, and using a variety of sources of information to develop a rich understanding of the forms and features of their chosen genre before they begin to plan their own narrative.4 Information literacy is embedded in the work of the Gather phase. This is where the teacher, as mentor and guide, can offer assistance and suggestions to help guide the students’ research by asking guided questions. At the beginning or end of each lesson,

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Inquiry circles are a wonderful way for students to share with others within the group who researching within the same genre as themselves. During this time, students share thoughts, growing ideas and facts they found out during their research. The aim is for all students to gather research notes which help them to answer the Inquiry questions they established before the Gather phase. After each Inquiry circle or research lesson, students complete a reflection in their journal. A good framework for reflecting on the Inquiry can be found on page 85 of the GIDF. This framework guides the students to consider what they can “recall, summarise, paraphrase, and extend.” If you have time to allow the students to spend more than a couple of lessons on this, it worthwhile having students complete the Going Deep worksheet on page 114 (see figure: 8.1).5

THE CREATE PHASE

Students are now ready to enter the Create phase. The main task in the Create stage is to synthesize ideas and respond to the expectations of the task with a deep and personal perspective. In this stage, students are able to begin to compile a range of written and visual responses to tasks that will help them to bring their narrative together.

To begin with, I had students complete a Pair Share Protocol (see figure: 8.4) worksheet and spend 10 minutes discussing the answers to their questions with others. This gives students one last chance to enrich their knowledge on the genre before they begin to plan their narrative. A range of writing activities are embedded into the program to help students to compose quality extracts that they can incorporate into their story. These activities are available on the Moodle page within each of the genre sections and are specific to that sub-genre. Some of these include:

1. Write a 10 line description of a setting within a dystopic fiction text;
2. Describe and design a character you would find in a steampunk story
3. Write a prologue for your Sci-Fi story that incorporates 5 words from the speculative fiction vocabulary list,
4. Create an email notice to all personnel in your troop regarding the changeover of systems to the new security upgrade to defend against the Outsiders.
5. You must go on a quest to save your world from impending doom. What and who do you bring with you and why?
6. Describe the evil presence that is threatening your imaginative world?

Students have five-seven lessons to work on the writing prompt activities and the first draft of their short story.

THE SHARE PHASE

After this, students are involved a variety of self and peer feedback sessions in which they complete feedback questionnaires that I have designed or adjusted from the Self-Reflection on Inquiry worksheet, Self-Reflection- Inquiry Tools sheet (see figure: 11.2). The purpose of the SHARE phase in this unit is to share, evaluate and reflect on the processes of learning and creating throughout the unit before the final submission of the narrative. Students displayed a strong sense of enjoyment and pride displaying their journals and stories and sharing them with their peers. It was extremely rewarding for all the teachers involved to see the high quality of both the journals and the finished narratives.

THE EVALUATE PHASE

For this phase I took two-three lessons and each student read the stories of and completed feedback sheets for three other students. This meant that by the end of the third lesson each student had completed two self-assessment feedback sheets and received three peer assessment feedback sheets. I then gave the students a lesson to make any adjustments to their first draft and to prepare their story for submission. I had a spare lesson so I allowed the class to look back through their writing diary and complete any unfinished activities in preparation for the ‘Sharing our Story’ phase of the unit.

To complete the unit we invited classes to visit the library with their writing journals and a copy of their final draft. The journals and stories were spread out on tables which were separated into each of the sub-genres. Students sat at the tables reading through each other’s stories and looking through the writing journals. The students and teachers alike were excited.

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about this activity and it was very rewarding for students as they took such pride in their work and were happy to show it off to their peers. The quality of the writing diaries and the narratives exceeded my initial expectations. Students not only completed the writing activities and story plans in imaginative ways but also included visuals and diagrams of their settings, technological advancements and even complex, labelled maps of their imaginative world. At the conclusion of the lesson, students completed a questionnaire on the unit allowing us to gather some valuable feedback on the way the students had engaged with the resources, taken control of their own learning, and the process by which they managed their preparation and planning of the narrative.

The success of this unit has inspired me to continue to incorporate Inquiry Based Learning experiences into our teaching and learning programs but it has also allowed myself and the other teachers to see how new pedagogical trends can easily be incorporated into our current practice by just refocusing the way we direct our students to investigate texts in our classrooms. I now always walk into class with an Inquiry question as the lesson focus and each activity is designed to help students to be able to compose a response to this question. Sometimes the questions are only for the lesson but sometimes we may spend the whole week working towards the composition of a thorough response.

Nurturing and awakening the inquisitive nature in our students is an effective way to engage them in their learning and I have found the most rewarding aspect is its ability to create a common sphere between teacher and student, were our passion for knowledge and literature can be shared amongst the younger generations through a sense of wonder, exploration and discovery.

References
CREATE SECTION: How to Write…..websites:

Consolidating Discovery?
Looking for different ways to engage your year 12? Creative Writing? Texts?

These video lectures from experienced and informed ETA teachers can help you and your students!

Edrolo HSC lectures
Unpacking Discovery – Mel Dixon
Creative Writing and Discovery – Mel Dixon, Kate Murphy and Jane Sherlock
Reading Task Section I – Michael Murray
Section III – Karen Yager
A Short History of Nearly Everything – Alison Cardinale
The Motorcycle Diaries – Aaron Dewhurst
Away – Mel Dixon and Eva Gold
The Tempest – Karen Yager
Robert Frost – Mel Dixon and Amy Hughes
Robert Gray – Aaron Dewhurst
Life of Pi – Amy Hughes
Frank Hurley – Deb McPherson
Wilfred Owen – Jane Sherlock
Metropolis /1984 – Karen Yager
Exploring Hamlet – Mel Dixon
Richard III / Looking for Richard – Steve Henry

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