Confirming Identity Using Drama Pedagogy: English Teachers’ Creative Response to High-Stakes Literacy Testing

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Abstract: English teachers often feel blamed for low results on high-stakes standardised literacy tests such as Australia’s National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Faced with pressure for their students to produce high scores, teachers can react by making changes to both content and strategies which result in a narrowing of curriculum and teacher pedagogy. The ‘Identity Texts Professional Learning Project’ began when a group of Australian secondary English teachers sought to eschew this propensity to narrow curriculum and practice and instead developed a creative, syllabus aligned way through which to improve the literacy and engagement predominantly for students with Language Backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) or for whom English is an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D). The resulting approach involved the use of drama-based pedagogy to craft identity texts (Cummins, 2000) that incorporated students’ cultures and linguistic resources, including first languages. Teachers in this professional learning project have described gains in student literacy and engagement, and strengthened links with community. This article will report on the ways these teachers came to value the role of drama pedagogy to strengthen student literacy and respond to the demands made by testing regimes that are currently used to assess students and their teachers.

Introduction

The teaching profession in Australia in recent decades has been strongly impacted by a regime of high-stakes external testing, teacher quality initiatives, a national teacher accreditation framework and an Australian Curriculum (Fehring & Nyland, 2012; Gannon, 2012; O’Mara, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2016). Primary and secondary teachers increasingly find themselves teaching and assessing English on a metaphorical ‘highwire’ (Dutton, 2017) as they negotiate a political and educational environment fuelled by continued assertions of poor literacy standards (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011; Parr, Bulpin & Rutherford, 2013) and Australia’s falling results on global measurements such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

English is the only mandatory subject taught in Australian schools from Foundation (5 years) to Year 12 (18 years) and is underpinned by a broad range of theoretical and pedagogical approaches. The Australian Curriculum: English (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority ACARA, 2014), which informs the English syllabuses in all Australian jurisdictions, includes Literacy as one of the three strands integrated in the teaching of subject English, along with the strands of Literature and Language. Literacy is also embedded in each teaching subject of the Australian Curriculum as a general capability, and is tested externally by the literacy elements of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing regime which takes place in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 of an Australian student’s schooling (ACARA, n.d). The results of the mandatory NAPLAN tests function as a diagnostic tool for improving student learning outcomes and for teacher and school improvement. They also provide data on
increased regulation and accountability. The common conflation of subject English with literacy (O’Sullivan, 2016) shapes a view that teachers of English are solely responsible for achieving improved literacy outcomes and therefore NAPLAN test results, despite the shared literacy teaching responsibilities outlined above. Research highlights how high-stakes standardised tests, such as NAPLAN, can challenge the ways English teachers situate learning and assessment in their classrooms (Brass, 2015), with teachers responding to explicit or implied ‘advice’ by changing their pedagogy to strategically prepare students for the NAPLAN tests. This is despite the promotion of NAPLAN as a skills-based test for which test preparation is said to be unnecessary. Pedagogy aimed at NAPLAN success has been shown to infiltrate everyday teaching practice (Brass, 2015; Comber, 2012), influence resource allocation, and involve significant emotional labour on the part of teachers (Comber, 2012; Cormack & Cromer, 2013; Parr, Bulfin & Rutherford, 2013).

The ongoing impact of NAPLAN on teachers’ pedagogy and assessment in English is significant. Following Gilborn and Youdell (2000), O’Mara (2014) has noted that is response to NAPLAN, society, schools and teachers resorting to a form of ‘educational triage’. This is undertaken to maximise the impact of scarce resources (Gillborn & Youdell, as cited in O’Mara, 2014), often with unanticipated consequences for marginalised groups and activities within a school. Australian schools function in a highly competitive ‘My School’ informed market and NAPLAN results play a significant role in shaping community perceptions. It is not surprising therefore that schools shift to ‘triage mode’ when responding to the literacy ‘emergency’ of low NAPLAN scores. O’Mara’s data revealed the following key responses to a situation she labels ‘Code Red NAPLAN’:

• Blame the workers under you.
• Keep ‘poor performing’ students away.
• Move on ‘poor performing’ students.
• Reduce other activities so you can focus on NAPLAN.
• Teach to the test: Make NAPLAN the curriculum.

(2014, p. 13)

Another impact of NAPLAN is the narrowing of English curricula and teachers’ pedagogical repertoire. Faced with the pressures to produce high test scores amidst time constraints, teachers make changes in both content and strategies (Berliner, 2011) and,
especially when working with less familiar syllabus documents, may reach for less engaging ready-to-teach resources and skate along the surface (O’Sullivan, Carroll & Cavanagh, 2008). NAPLAN has been found to directly reduce the type and variety of writing undertaken in English classes, such as when narrative and storytelling were marginalised for a period after 2009, when persuasive writing became the sole writing task required in NAPLAN (Parr, Bulfin & Rutherford, 2013). As evidence of this trend of reducing curriculum breadth, O’Mara (2014) cites a deputy principal who argued his school could not make use of a literacy-rich animation program on the grounds that his school’s NAPLAN results were low and that they therefore had to focus on the ‘basics’ in order to improve test results.

The ‘Identity Text Professional Learning Project’: English Teaching Beyond ‘Triage Mode’

The ‘Identity Texts Professional Learning Project’ is an ongoing professional learning initiative that emerged from the keen desire of a group of teachers and we, as their university partners, to eschew the aforementioned propensity to narrow curriculum and pedagogical repertoire in response to the perceived pressure of a high-stakes testing context. The teachers involved in the professional learning project were from the English department of a secondary girls’ school in south-west Sydney, NSW, Australia. The school has a high proportion of students who could be defined as having Language Backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), or for whom English is an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D), and therefore speaking one or more languages other than English. The participants range in years of teaching experience, including several early career teachers and two teachers who had previously completed their teaching practicum at the school.

As colleagues and mentors, we had worked with these teachers for several years prior to the project supporting their professional learning around the teaching of English, language and literacy. The university-school relationship at the basis of this project initially emerged from ongoing professional dialogue commenced through our facilitation of professional learning courses, and was sustained by our work in the school as tertiary mentors during our pre-service teachers’ in-school professional experiences. The university-school partnership developed from this close working relationship resulting in support for pre-service teachers to undertake their first professional experience and in the placement of interns with the school. In turn, we provided professional learning for staff, both costed and accredited courses and on-site professional learning, as part of our service role in supporting schools and communities. As teacher educators, we continue to see our connection with the teachers as a reciprocal relationship in that we and the teachers bring to our dialogue distinctive understandings shaped by our in-school teaching experiences, knowledge of the research-based practices of English teaching, and the contextual factors impacting on students and school communities.

After initial dialogue with the English Co-ordinator and English teachers, and with support from the Principal, the following dimensions of the professional learning project were agreed to: a commitment to an ‘elbow to elbow’ model for working in the space between existing and new teacher professional knowledge; and, the research-informed decision to incorporate identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011) and drama-based pedagogy into the English department’s existing units of work, with a view to further develop student literacy. These dimensions of the project are outlined below.

Working in the Liminal Space: ‘Elbow To Elbow’ professional dialogue

To support the English teachers’ professional learning, a conscious decision was made to work ‘elbow to elbow’ with the teachers at the planning and programming stages of this project. Especially in these times of increasing accountability and regulation of teachers’ work, classroom teachers can feel that they are bombarded by special projects and increasing demands on their time (Darling-Hammond, 2011). Implementing pedagogical change involves a period of flux or transition while existing practices and beliefs are ‘tested’ in light of new knowledge and ways of doing. In any period of transition, including during teacher professional learning, this period of being ‘betwixt or between’ or in the liminal period (see also Cook-Sather, 2006; van Gennep, 1977; Nelson & Harper, 2006; Turner, 1964) can invoke feelings of confusion and challenge. By choosing to work as colleagues, ‘elbow to elbow’, with the teachers we sought to support the teachers to develop the knowledge and skills to address their immediately identified needs but that was understood in ways that could also help them address future teaching and learning issues (see also Timperley, 2011).

To respond to the challenges of their work in subject
English, the teachers began by positioning students at the heart of their professional learning process with the goals they established allowed student learning and wellbeing to function as the touchstone in their planning of the learning activities and pedagogies (see also Timperley, 2011). EAL/D learners are simultaneously learning English, learning through English and learning about English (Halliday, 2004). Teachers therefore need support to meet the pedagogical challenges of teaching students who are also meeting the challenges of learning in and about a new language, and this became a focus for the project.

With the support of school leadership, the teachers established opportunities for professional learning both in and outside school hours that involved ongoing collaboration with each other and we as guiding colleagues. In these meetings, we identified the literacy needs of the students, probed potential resources with a view to enhancing students’ learning, and designed rich, syllabus aligned ways to prepare students for NAPLAN – all actions indicative of the resilience and passion of those who teach English (Manuel, 2004; Manuel & Carter, 2016). The aim was to develop units of work for Years 7 to 10 that would not only improve student literacy, but would also maximise student engagement, develop deep thinking, and implement creative pedagogy (Jefferson & Anderson, 2017).

Having previously identified a need for knowledge and skills in grammar, all teachers in this project had already completed one or more courses focused on teaching grammar in context. The teachers were already using this knowledge to inform their teaching, so the aim of this project was to broaden the pedagogical repertoire of teachers so that the teachers could embed explicit literacy development as well as engage and support their students. The teachers’ existing English units of work for Years 7 to 10 were therefore used as the basis for developing new strategies and material, a process shaped by our view that there is no expert who knows better about a classroom than the teacher in that classroom (Timperley, 2011).

Ultimately, what we had to offer in this project were research-informed perspectives on why we might engage students in the crafting of identity texts and how that might be achieved through drama-based pedagogy. These perspectives are outlined below.

**Why identity texts?**

Research shows that literacy gains can be achieved when students are given the opportunity to represent identity and negotiate aspects of their culture (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2002). Furthermore, ‘EALD learners … have diverse talents and capabilities and a range of prior learning experiences and levels of literacy in their first language and in English’ (NESA, p. 7). Given the LBOTE/EAL/D context of the school, we suggested using identity texts (Cummins & Early, 2011) as a pedagogical tool to engage students, support development in writing, and affirm students’ identities as ‘intelligent, imaginative and linguistically talented’ (Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 4). In suggesting this focus, we were mindful of the view that:

> language-minority students’ educational progress is strongly influenced by the extent to which individual educators become advocates for the promotion of students’ linguistic talents, actively encourage community participation in developing students’ academic and cultural resources, and implement pedagogical approaches that succeed in liberating students from instructional dependence. (Cummins, 1986, p. 32)

While the construct of identity may not always be the focus of current discussions about student achievement and teacher effectiveness, Cummins, Hu, Markus and Montero (2015) argue that educational achievement is related to the confirmation of identity; they use the term identity text to ‘draw attention to the essential link between identity affirmation, societal power relations, and literacy engagement’ (p. 556). They further argue that pedagogies that affirm identity will impact on learning, and that, if educational responses to underachievement by students from marginalised communities do not address the causal role of identity devaluation, they are unlikely to be successful (Cummins et al., 2015).

Developing an identity text allows students to use material and experiences from their own backgrounds including their own linguistic resources and involves the opportunity for first language use. An identity text can be an oral text, a written text, a visual text or a multimodal text, but it will be a text that connects to the student’s community. It will also be a text that disrupts a transmission pedagogy that views the student as a blank slate (Freire, 1975) and, as such, is a pedagogical tool that wholly aligns with the emphases of the Australian Curriculum’s general capability of Intercultural Understanding:

>[S]tudents develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped,
and the variable and changing nature of culture … Intercultural understanding combines personal, interpersonal and social knowledge and skills. (ACARA, 2014).

By invoking students’ prior cultural resources, identity texts enable students to learn more about the cultural backgrounds that shape their own identities, and those of others. The creation of these texts goes beyond a mere ‘feel good experience’ and applies rigorous teaching and learning that offers equitable access to knowledge (Cummins & Early, 2011). At the core of Cummins’s transformational pedagogy using identity texts is empowerment – understood as the collaborative creation of power that results from classroom interactions that enable students to relate curriculum content to their individual and collective experiences and to analyse social issues relevant to their lives (Cummins, 2000, p. 246).

Furthermore, experiences with identity texts draw on what students bring to the classroom and can help link these primary discourses to secondary academic discourses. While identity texts can function as highly valued texts in their own right, they can also function as an ‘interim discourse’ in that they can be employed to build on students’ ‘primary discourses’ and move them closer towards the ‘secondary discourse’ or more academic discourse (Gee, 2000) typical of much writing in schools. Identity texts can thus occupy an interim space and facilitate the process of moving towards these secondary discourses. Cummins argues that when teachers encourage students to value their prior knowledge and experiences and draw on their home languages and cultures in their classroom work, they set in motion a process of challenging preconceived views of marginalised, linguistic and cultural groups in society (Cummins, 1981; Cummins & Early, 2011).

To this end, and after the initial meetings, a series of workshops was held to outline some of the strategies that could be used to incorporate identity texts and the reasons for doing so. The wellbeing of the students was supported by addressing the issue of subtractive bilingualism (Collier & Thomas, 2001) as a barrier to educational success. This was done by welcoming and providing opportunities for the use of home languages in the classroom and creating opportunities for students to interact with their community when crafting texts about their own lives. As Cummins et al., state, ‘… teachers [can] expand the instructional space beyond simply an English-only zone to include students’ and parents’ multilingual and multimodal repertoires even when they themselves [don’t] speak the multiple languages represented in their classrooms’ (2015, p. 557). This focus on language, especially first languages, was also seen as a key to strengthening ties with the local communities – it supported students to create imaginative texts using their individual cultural and linguistic resources with support from their communities.

Drama-based english pedagogy and literacy: a creative response to NAPLAN
To incorporate identity texts into the teachers’ classroom practice, we looked to drama-based pedagogy as an effective teaching and learning tool. Significant to the literacy focus of the project is the increasing evidence to support the positive impact of drama-based pedagogy on additional language learning (Dunn & Stinson, 2011; Piazzoli, 2011; Stinson & Freebody, 2006) with the affective space created by drama strategies having been shown to reduce the anxiety of second language learners and build confidence and capacity for communicating in the spoken mode (Piazzoli, 2011). With its process-oriented approach to learning (Lee, Patall, Cawthon & Steingut, 2015, p. 4) drama pedagogy aligns with the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2014) general capabilities of Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, and Intercultural Understanding, and has been shown to work towards positive academic and wellbeing outcomes for students (Ewing, 2010; Ewing & Saunders, 2016; Lee et al., 2015). Imagination is a means through which students can assemble a coherent world and cultivate empathy (Greene, 1995), while embodiment and enactment are ‘often important precursors to other ways of knowing’ and can thus facilitate deep learning (Ewing, 2012, p. 9). The connection between language development and the use of drama as a pedagogical approach has been well established (Dunn, Stinson & Winston, 2011; Ewing, 2012). More specifically, drama’s kinaesthetic engagement can promote broader student engagement in learning (Lee et al., 2015; Rothwell, 2011).

Oral language is central to developing student literacy, given its relevance to both the ‘telling’ of identity stories and writing. Mercer argues that group talking activities, such as those in collaborative drama activities, provide opportunities for learners to ‘practise and evaluate ways of using language to think collectively, away from the teacher’s authoritative presence’ (2002, p. 19). The leadership of a teacher can then support
students to practise using the genres of their culture and to ‘think together about their experience in the communities in which they are cultural apprentices’ (Mercer, 2002, p. 11). Drama-based pedagogy can offer both this safe ‘space’ for practising language and the opportunity for teacher leadership in framing and interpreting the language learning in the activity.

Drama-based pedagogy also offers a vehicle for encouraging students to collaboratively develop spoken and then written identity texts that can foreground individual voices. In classrooms where talk is valued and fostered as a key learning tool, conversation becomes key to learning and language development. When opportunities for talk are abundant (Gibbons, 2006), a teacher can use many strategies, including their own in-depth knowledge about language, to assist students to not only draw on their oral language but also move to the educationally valued written form (Rossbridge & Rushton, 2014, p. 2).

The teachers therefore planned activities emphasising the importance of rich immersion in the oral mode using drama-based pedagogy, with the group nature of the tasks scaffolding students in their learning. Teachers then worked slowly along the mode continuum (Martin, 1985) from speaking to writing, providing support as students created written texts based on the drama activities (see also Derewianka, 2014; Rossbridge & Rushton, 2014). The examples outlined below demonstrate how the written texts created in response to drama activities can sit in a space of transition between spoken and written mode in that they are written representations of the spoken word. This can help make the progression to writing feel ‘safe’ and therefore more achievable for students, particular those who are not working in their first language.

The strategies for teaching writing in this project included explicit teaching about language, and were based on teacher judgements about students’ language needs. The development of vocabulary was identified as a particular literacy focus based on NAPLAN, classroom observations, and student work samples. The focus was on developing engagement and knowledge in subject English while supporting students to creatively choose how to use the English language as well as their first language to express themselves and articulate their identities. The students could therefore draw on authentic, meaningful personal experiences and, with drama pedagogy as the initial vehicle, be afforded safe opportunities to develop literacy and to support reflective thinking about their identities as individuals and in relation to their families and broader communities.

This decision to employ drama-based pedagogy in this project is notably counter to the trend that sees the creative arts falling victim to the narrowing of curriculum typical of the educational triage response discussed earlier (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, cited in O’Mara, 2014). The teachers in this project, like English teachers across Australia, are aware of the significance given to NAPLAN results. They are, however, equally cognisant of the need to avoid making NAPLAN the curriculum and of marginalising student engagement and wellbeing in a misguided drive to improve results.

Given the reasons outlined above and because drama-based pedagogy also provides an opportunity to negotiate ‘ways of coming to understand and make connections across different kinds of knowledge’ (Ewing, 2010, p. 7), the implementation of drama-based pedagogy to create identity texts was seen as a valuable way to improve engagement and enhance the learning and wellbeing of the students whose teachers were involved in this project.

Implementing identity texts through drama-based pedagogy

Prior to the project, the English teachers had made use of drama pedagogy in units of work based on drama texts, but had rarely used it to facilitate learning for non-drama content. They were, however, familiar with some strategies for role-play and improvisation. Given that the level of teacher artistry has a potential impact on learning outcomes (Dunn & Stinson, 2011), we facilitated professional learning that refined and extended the teachers’ prior knowledge of drama strategies and supported them as they implemented the strategies in their English literacy activities. The strategy ‘Advance/Detail’ (Ewing & Simons, 2016) was implemented to support students to tell their own stories with prompting from a partner to provide additional details and description when needed. The strategies of ‘walking in role’ and ‘conscience alley’ (see Ewing & Simons, 2016) were selected to give students the opportunity to clearly focus on understanding an individual’s motivation and to help identify the key moments in their story that allow them to develop and act on these motivations. All the strategies were offered as possibilities for developing identity firstly in oral and then, with further preparation and scaffolding, in written texts.

In all activities, aesthetically charged (Dunn & Stinson, 2011), personally relevant identity texts were used, and this afforded ways to engage students and support
them to refine their use of language, and especially develop their vocabulary.

The following sequence of activities that employs the strategy of oral Storytelling, Advance/Detail and Readers’ Theatre was offered as a suggestion:

1. Students develop a story, an identity text, by speaking to their parents or caregivers to discover and re-tell a story from home. The power of story and the invitation to use their home language in the telling provides an authentic link between the home and the school, and between curriculum and culture (Cummins, 2000; Cummins & Early, 2011). The use of the home language can range from the use of some key words within a text written in English to producing a whole text in the home language with the idea of translating it later.

2. When these stories are brought back to the class it is suggested that the ‘Advance/Detail’ strategy (see also Ewing & Simons, 2016) be used to tell the story to a partner.

3. Then, in a pair/share activity, the students can use criteria, previously developed by the group, to decide which story would make the best dramatic presentation of the story. The link between curriculum and culture is further affirmed through the use of the language of appraisal encouraging students to make judgements about the work and the story in the same way that the English syllabus requires them to make evaluations of texts (for example ACELT 1627; 1629).

4. When the choice is made, the group can then be provided with a scaffold to support the collaborative development of a ‘Readers’ Theatre’ presentation (see also Ewing & Simons, 2016) of the identity text. A narrator can easily manage the presence of one or more home languages and this allows students to collaborate in a shared production using several home languages.

5. After the ‘Readers’ Theatre’ is written, it can then be presented to the class or recorded and presented at an event to which parents and community members are invited.

These steps provide opportunities for students to develop the macro skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. They also afford opportunities for the teacher to recast language (Gibbons, 2006) and to develop knowledge about the structure and features of texts at all levels from text, to paragraph, sentence, group and word (Derewianka, 2011) while also developing vocabulary. Welcoming the use of the home language in the classroom not only has an impact on the emotional wellbeing of students but it also provides the opportunity for the robust discussion of language itself (D’Warte, 2014). Learning is enhanced when students are provided with a meaningful context in which to explore their language choices; the above sequence of activities provides a non-confrontational way for students to share knowledge about language and to also share their personal language resources.

Teachers in the project were also supported by the suggested sequence of activities as it afforded opportunities to alternate between the creation of oral and written texts and allowed opportunities for discussion about those texts, while at the same time utilising and building on the students’ linguistic resources. This extract is from a Readers’ Theatre collaboratively developed by four Year 7 students, who did not share the same cultural or linguistic backgrounds, but worked together to dramatise a story. To develop their text, they had to each tell their stories orally and then listen to them and evaluate them. After selecting the story they wanted to develop into a Readers’ Theatre, they worked together to produce the written text and then performed it, reading the lines they had written. The following extract from one of the student scripts demonstrates the multilingual approach to their storytelling:

Mother: (Running after her son …) ALIA!! (She yelled).
Narrator: As the mother ran after her son, at the exact same moment, an explosion erupted!
William: Woah! (He said with fefe, running backwards.)
Narrator: Just as William ran backwards, he didn’t see the pole behind him. As William fainted, his uso came searching for him.
James: Will! (James cried out) faamolemole, tell me you’re not dead! (He pleaded as he found his uso lying on the ground.) Faamolemole! Not after our tama passed away!
*The students also provided a key to the language they used in the play: fefe – fear; uso – brother; faamolemole – please.

Importantly, when working with identity texts, teachers are able to choose from a suite of strategies in a way that suits them and their students. There is no mandated program; rather, teachers are encouraged to use their own knowledge of their students and their professional judgements to modify their units of work to incorporate the drama-based pedagogy and identity texts.
Conclusion

Identity texts and drama-based pedagogy can therefore offer rich possibilities for developing literacy and affirming identity. The findings from the ethics approved research phase of ‘The Identity Texts Professional Learning Project’ will be fully reported in the near future. Teachers who have participated in the project report they now perceive drama as a valuable component of their creative pedagogical repertoire in all units in English and an effective way to develop student literacy. As one teacher of Year 8 observed, ‘Drama – I used to only do it when I absolutely had to in drama units – but now I use it all the time. It’s just what I do when I teach English.’ They also value the way identity texts work to confirm identity and strengthen links with community. We believe that this project thus offers an approach to literacy development that aligns with the teachers’ professional beliefs and knowledge about teaching, student engagement and wellbeing, and subject English. The approach helps facilitate the improvement in student literacy needed to meet the NAPLAN literacy goals of schools and sectors. Therefore, the professional learning project is both timely and significant in the current context.

We hope that more teachers begin to address the pressure to improve NAPLAN results or literacy generally by focusing on student engagement and by building on all the linguistic and cultural capital that students bring to the classroom. The Quality Teaching Framework (DET, 2008) suggests that deep knowledge and deep understanding are best developed when students are supported to become engaged, self-directed, self-regulated learners in a context that focuses on cultural knowledge and inclusivity. While there are many challenges to achieving this goal, some of the practical strategies employed in the ‘Identity Texts Professional Learning Project’ can support individual teachers to develop a pedagogy which explicitly addresses these aspects of teaching while simultaneously addressing the demands made by the testing regimes currently used to assess both students and their teachers.

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