Rhetoric, agency, pedagogy: a “new” perspective on language and literacy education

Bill Green 1 · Paul Molyneux 2 · Janet Scull 3

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Abstract
With the explicit goal of today’s school students being active citizens, critically engaged and democratically minded over the long course of their schooling, the authors of this article focus on the notions of rhetoric and, relatedly, rhetorical agency. While these notions are increasingly understood in secondary school contexts, their application in primary and early-childhood settings is under-explored. We define and propose rhetorical agency as a purposeful focus of school literacy practice and pedagogy, illustrating this with four examples in which rhetorical agency can be supported in the primary classroom. These relate to research we have undertaken or supported around children learning bilingually, students engaging in place-based investigations, rich text use, and critical literacy in the early years. Ultimately, we invite consideration of how primary classrooms and public schooling, and more specifically the practice of language and literacy education, might be enhanced expressly through a rhetorical lens.

Keywords Rhetoric · Agency · Literacy · Pedagogy · Primary schooling

1 Introduction: a rhetorical lens

In this paper, we make a case for the concept of rhetoric, as a “new” organising and framing principle for language and literacy studies in education. In actual fact, it is hardly a new concept—indeed, it has been around for millennia, and its centrality in education goes right back to the Ancient Greeks. But somewhere along the line, rhetoric as such fell out of common usage, at least as a positive term. Moreover, it became identified with an impoverished sense of empty words, or perhaps as merely words—verbiage. However, what is often forgotten is that...
this deficit view of rhetoric is itself very much a historical phenomenon; it emerged some time over the eighteenth into the nineteenth centuries, when rhetoric was (re)constructed as the limited and highly constrained formulation in which it is commonly or popularly understood today. Our proposal here is to (re)construct it once again, and in doing so, to seek to realise it as a reconceptualised, “postmodern” rhetoric, congruent with the complex semiotic reality of the contemporary and emerging lifeworld.

In particular we want to emphasise the issue of rhetorical agency. This involves, crucially, the relationship between rhetoric and agency, as key terms in a new understanding of communication and power, education, and identity. We see the active development of rhetorical agency as fundamental to education and schooling, and beyond, and as integral to the work and interplay of teachers and learners at all levels. Central to this, further, is the question of citizenship. How are children and young people to be imagined and formed as citizens in an active, critical democracy, and over the long course of their schooling? For us, an important and perhaps even a decisive feature in this regard is their language and literacy education—especially, and all the more so, when this is diffracted through a rhetorical lens. There are implications and challenges here for classroom pedagogy and teacher education, and for how to best bring together pedagogies and environments in ways conducive to rich forms of rhetoric and agency, socio-personal development, and public life.

In what follows, we firstly introduce and outline the concept of rhetoric itself, elaborating on its nature and history, and indicating something of its wider educational value and significance. Following that, we turn more directly to consider primary classrooms and public schooling, and more specifically to the practice of language and literacy education, conceived expressly through a rhetorical lens.

2 On rhetoric

What is rhetoric? Why rhetoric? We want to tackle these questions first off, in making the case for rhetoric to become, effectively, a superordinate concept for the field and the profession. Our initial reference point in this regard is the now enshrined framework for English in the Australian national curriculum, and more particularly its assertion of language, literacy, and literature as its central organising feature. There is, of course, much still in debate about this formulation. That said, it remains useful, although preferably reconceptualised as a network of historical categories and key concepts, with regard specifically to the territory of English¹ as a designated curriculum area, across the full range of schooling. This means taking account of both secondary education and the primary school, ideally K-12, and even prior to that. Preliminary work has already begun with regard to secondary English teaching; there is much less activity of this kind in debate about primary and early-childhood settings. Given the criticism that how the triad was originally presented was far too discrete and linear, the following diagram has been put forward as a better representation of the framework (Green, 2017) (Fig. 1):

What needs to be stressed here is that it is the network that has priority, rather than these being first and foremost discrete categories, let alone distinctive curriculum components or

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¹ Our concern here is with English as L1 education; our argument might also be pertinent, however, to other L1 subjects around the world (Green & Erixon [Eds.], Green & Erixon [Eds.], 2020).
realms ("strands"). Rhetoric is best seen as sitting above all of this, and framing it, as a distinctive way of thinking about textuality, capability, and power.

A further point to make here is that while we acknowledge that "literacy" has clearly been a generative term in recent years, especially as framed by what is called the New Literacy Studies (NLS), it has also been argued, increasingly, that this is no longer good enough (Green, 2018). Indeed, literacy can be seen as too much of a catch-all term, and as amorphous and imprecise. After all, it embraces everything from "basic skills" to "critical literacy". Hence, we propose rhetoric as an alternative—or perhaps it is a matter of thinking literacy (or language and literacy) as seen through a rhetorical lens. (This might be seen as "literacy plus", if you like.) What we are advocating for, then, is what has been described as "rhetorical capability", along the lines that Medway (2008, p. 133) has outlined: "I mean rhetorical capability in the generous classical sense, to refer to the effective use of language for all purposes; it is a larger category than 'literacy' because it does not implicitly subordinate oral abilities – and, from a different perspective, it more accurately represents what English [and Language Arts] should be about". The question to ask, then, is: What value is added to literacy education, as such, when we do this?

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Key to understanding rhetoric in this context is its focus on language in use, or the practice of textuality. Doing things with texts: although that is a deceptively simple description of what rhetoric is, and what it is for, it is apt enough. It foregrounds two things that we see as very important: firstly, that rhetoric must be grasped as a practice, and secondly, its worldliness—its work in and on the world. This is important because it helps in re-asserting English and Language Arts teaching as cultural politics and critical pedagogy—something that has become somewhat muted in recent times. What it enables therefore is a stronger sense of agency and democracy, as key principles, with English and Language Arts teaching understood accordingly as a form of curriculum praxis.

There are other reasons to turn to rhetoric, however, particularly at this conjuncture. To emphasise the historicity of English teaching in this way does not mean ignoring the facts of global social, cultural, and economic change—quite the contrary. One such consideration is that “English” is now itself an international language, and indeed in an important sense increasingly a lingua franca. It is no longer either a possession or a marker of what have been traditionally the Anglophone countries, as historical traces of the afterlife of the British Empire. As various commentators have noted, the sun may even be setting, inexorably, on what has been called the American Century. What does this mean for English teaching and the Language Arts, certainly in the long term? But equally significant, it seems to us, is that rhetoric, as Richard Andrews (2014, p. 192) has written, “is not attached to any one language”.

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**Fig. 1** English in The Australian Curriculum (Green, 2017)
As he sees it, this “provide[s] a non-partisan basis for communicational need”, as well as “at more advanced academic levels, it can provide the basis for comparative study of the particular characteristics of different languages” (Andrews, 2014, p. 193). This means that rhetoric can be seen as also providing potentially a more explicit and productive link to L1 education, as a reconceptualised transnational field. Rhetoric as it is being evoked here would be equally as relevant to “Swedish” or “German” as to school subjects like English and the Language Art (Green, 2017). Likewise, contemporary notions of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014)—young people’s dynamic shifts in and out of languages in their enacted linguistic repertoires—align closely with our restatement of the importance of rhetoric. Indeed, it is intriguing that this has not been recognised to date, because it makes so much sense.

That is especially the case when consideration is given to what is now widely acknowledged—the emergence of a new communication order, a new semiotic landscape, or as described elsewhere, a paradigmatic media-shift from “print” to “digital-electronics” (Green et al., 2007). This is surely relevant for primary schooling and early childhood education in Australia, given not only our increasing multicultural, multilingual society but also our participation in global exchange. In this regard, then, it needs to be emphasised that rhetoric is applicable well beyond written (“print”) texts, or written language. Rhetoric pertains as much to speech (sometimes overlooked or undervalued in recent times) as to writing, and readily embraces the multimodal turn. Indeed, it extends to communication more generally. As noted elsewhere, such a focus on rhetoric, reconceptualised, thus means “taking into account, in particular, the emergence of the digital-electronic apparatus as the primary shaping and framing principle for contemporary existence and communication”, and thereby accommodating “digital culture and media, and the shift to multimodality as a field of interest and engagement” (Green, 2017, p. 76).

3 Rhetoric, agency, and young children

Notions of rhetoric and the importance of rhetorical agency are entirely consistent with the ways in which language and literacy education in the primary school is best viewed, with a potent added-value. While the “new” nomenclature around rhetoric has been more commonly applied to secondary school/subject English contexts, its tenets have seamless applications to the various ways that the substantive project of the language-and-literacy acquisition and development of children in the primary years has been realised. Frameworks that reflect the emphases of contemporary primary educators’ language and literacy programs, such as the “four resources” model (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Morgan et al., 2014; Serafini, 2012), the integrated three dimensions of the “3D” model (Durrant & Green, 2000; Green & Beavis, 2012) and a multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 2000; Mills, 2011; Kervin & Comber, 2019), all emphasise students’ agency through critical and creative engagement with diverse texts, and the development of young children’s interest in and ability to engage in literate action for authentic purposes. So too, the work of those working in systemic-functional linguistics and genre theory (for example Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2008) focused teachers and the primary literacy curriculum on

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2 There may be a ready connection here to ESL, too, as well as the teaching of other languages.

3 See Hogarth et al. (2021) for an account of rhetoric and citizenship in Scandinavian national curriculum reform, with specific reference to schooling from primary to upper-secondary.
supporting children to make meaning and communicate ideas for a range of in- and out-of-school purposes and audiences. And, finally, the linking of literacy and place (Comber, 2016; Gruenewald, 2008; Somerville, 2007) fosters students’ strategic and purposeful deployment of literacies in response to issues of both local and global importance. The idea of rhetorical agency augments or complements these existing literacy frameworks and pedagogies by reorienting our attention to enabling young learners to develop the ability and self-belief “to be outward looking, to engage with the world and to help forge proactive and balanced citizenship” (Andrews, 2019, p. 90).

Many children begin their primary school as highly agentic, having been apprenticed into rich language and literacy practices (often in more than one language) in the home and in preschool settings. While not all children, especially those in lower SES households and/or living in under-served communities, develop and refine these understandings prior to commencing school, it is salutary to recall Halliday’s (1975) functional model of language, which recognises even very young children as empowered with functional, communicative skills that address their physical, emotional, and social needs. In terms of early language development and literacy acquisition in the years prior to school, many (but not all) children have been actively engaged in hundreds of hours of listening and responding to stories, in the forms of family conversations and sophisticated, often polysemic, picture-books. This early exposure to narrative text-forms, elaborated sentence structures, uncommon vocabulary, and literary language lays valuable foundations for literacy development in the early years of primary school. Such children have been active participants in communicative events—making writing-like marks on paper and drawing—for diverse purposes (e.g. creating birthday or get-well cards, making lists, sharing enthusiasms for animals, trains, or dinosaurs). These experiences give them their initial understandings of writing forms and their potential to inform, entertain, and influence. These experiences also provide them with a sense of agency and power as they act with intent and purpose.

These concepts are not foreign to policy and pedagogy in early childhood education—in fact, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education, & Training, Australia, 2009/2019) foregrounds identity, connectedness, wellbeing, confidence, and communication as key outcomes. Similarly, ACARA positions the teaching of English (with its earlier-mentioned three-strand emphasis on language, literature and literacy) as central to the development of confident communicators, imaginative thinkers, and informed citizens. As such, when a central purpose of schooling is seen as recognising children’s existing resources and apprenticing them into new and powerful literacy repertoires, their rhetorical (and perhaps their social and political) agency is greatly enhanced.

4 Rhetorical agency: action and intent

If children begin school with explicit understandings of their own agency in terms of how to engage in literate action in ways that achieve goals, have impact, leverage influence, and enact empowerment, the issue needs to be addressed or revisited as to what teachers can (and must) do to continue and enhance this. A commitment to supporting students’ rhetorical, social, and political agency, and developing pedagogies that operationalise this, needs to be articulated. Teacher action and teaching with intent, in terms of an overtly enacted plan to foreground and foster these rhetorical, social, and political dimensions, need to be operationalised. This section presents four contexts in which rhetorical agency can be supported in the primary classroom.
These relate to research we have undertaken or supported around children learning bilingually, students engaging in place-based investigations, rich text use, and critical literacy in the early years. All offer insights, we argue, into rhetorical agency in operation in the primary school.

4.1 Developing agency in English and other languages

Language competency, the use of language with precision and sophistication, underlies a student’s ability to use language with intent. While it is common practice in early-years classrooms in Australia to focus on English language learning, less common are language programs that recognise and value the cultural and linguistic diversity of plurilingual families, and how these resources might be embedded in literacy programs to support children’s home languages and the learning of English. In essence, we are referring to the processes and outcomes of additive bilingualism, where “students add a second language to their intellectual toolkit while continuing to develop conceptually and academically in their first language” (Cummins, 2017, p 406). While notions of additive bilingualism have been critiqued for insufficient attention to entrenched raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015), such programs are attentive to cultural and linguistic diversity and the multiplicity and malleability of languages and literacies available as resources for meaning-making (New London Group, 2000).

Longitudinal research undertaken into the Karen-English Bilingual Early Years Project (Molyneux et al., 2016) provides a clear illustrative example of organisational structures of early learning that can be reframed as promoting rhetorical agency. When viewed through a rhetorical lens, the program’s twin aims to strengthen English language learning and to provide additional language learning are seen as building the linguistic repertoire of students, enabling them to engage in discussion and debate bilingually. Paris (2009, p. 431) also refers to this practice, and uses the terms “linguistic dexterity” to describe the ability to use a range of language practices in a multiethnic society, and “linguistic plurality” to describe a consciousness of language use in social interactions. As discussed above, rhetoric is not attached to any one language (Andrews, 2014), and therefore is appropriately drawn in here.

The English outcomes for the majority of students who participated in the Karen-English program were at or above expected achievement levels, with this being the case for the three different language cohorts of students within the bilingual programme (English, Karen, and other language-background students). Moreover, the strongest performing students were those who were adding a third language to their repertoire of practice (Molyneux et al., 2016). Building competency across two or more languages provided a strong foundation for young students’ literacy learning, fostering increased agency as children learned to communicate with intent to diverse audiences, and using language effectively for a wide range of purposes, appropriate to the communicative context (Hogarth, 2019). In this example of classroom pedagogy, rhetorical agency and capability was achieved through both increased language competence and valuing children’s experiences and what they know, and their connections to the wider world (Jacobs & Marea, 2019). When viewed through a rhetorical lens, students’ agency, identity, and empowerment were fostered through the opportunity to learn bilingually.

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4 This project—a state government initiative in the western suburbs of Melbourne—operated for five years, trialling the teaching of Karen (the language of many refugee-background families from Myanmar) alongside English to all children in one year level cohort. Its successes and challenges were documented throughout the project’s life.
most particularly for those students whose linguistic resources are often overlooked or marginalised (Molyneux, 2004, 2009).

4.2 Place-based education and rhetorical agency

Over six years from 2011 to 2016, transnational teams comprising Australian pre-service primary and secondary teachers and Indian practising teachers worked collaboratively in an under-served school context in Delhi. The resulting teaching drew on notions of place-based education where teachers “structure learning and communication experiences around the things that are most meaningful to their students: their own places, people and popular culture and concerns” (Comber et al., 2007, p. 14). Additionally, a story pedagogy that made rich literature central to the curriculum enabled powerful teaching and learning to take place. The rich literature enhanced students’ learning both linguistically and conceptually. The place-based pedagogies allowed for investigations of relevance to the children to be supported.

Examples of the learning that took place include a camera project (see Molyneux & Tyler, 2014) where photographs that children had taken of people and places significant to them became a vehicle for classroom talk and writing. As well as building strong home-school-community links through this project, valuable identity-work was achieved, as the children’s linguistic and cultural resources, as well as those of their families, were affirmed and utilised in the service of classroom learning. In another example of place-based education at this Delhi school, children were supported to conduct community investigations, using survey questions that they developed and used locally, within their families and in the broader neighbourhood. The results of this data collection supported children’s deeper understanding of their locality as richly diverse, comprising a multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-skilled population. Community members were asked both about their favourite place in the neighbourhood and an issue of concern for them. The results helped children appreciate the complexity of their urban environment and established a context—with their teachers’ support—for taking strategic and appropriate social action. These examples show attention to both a rhetorical and a political agency—through development of concepts and language that enable children to investigate and act with intent.

4.3 Rich texts and rhetorical agency

An early-years classroom that makes extensive use of children’s literature and fosters engaged conversations around these texts allows for rich linguistic, visual, and conceptual input that in turn build rhetorical capability. When children hear and view a picture-book like Rosie’s Walk (Hutchins, 1968), it not only provides a simple narrative that augments children’s understanding of stories and storytelling, but also invites (almost demands) their input and commentary, as the action they see in the illustrations is not reflected in the written words. When children listen to or revisit Where is the Green Sheep? (Fox & Horacek, 2006), they are given the opportunity to hear the rhyming and rhythmic cadences of literary book language as well as to offer their thoughts about the repeated question of the green sheep’s location. These opportunities for both receptive and expressive language support children’s rhetorical agency as they provide highly engaging spaces for the hearing and articulating of more elaborate, decontextualized forms of language (Raban, 2014).

As a pedagogical practice, collaborative talk about texts provides opportunities for students to engage with a range of text meanings with the assistance of a more skilled co-participant. As
young children learn to read, discussion provides a vehicle for students to reflect upon, interrogate, and revise their understandings of text meanings (Scull, 2010). As Wells (1991, p. 88) states, “children need to see and hear enactments of those inner mental processes that are the essence of literate behaviour so they can appropriate them and deploy them for themselves”. When we take a rhetorical lens to these interactions, we apprentice young readers to engage with texts in ways appropriate to their different forms and purposes. At this early stage of students’ reading development, the importance of negotiation and interpretation of text meanings is highlighted, as teachers’ challenge students to share and defend ideas, to make connections between that which was known and the new information, and to rigorously examine texts read (Lightner & Wilkinson, 2017). Indeed, there are clear and coherent links here to critical literacies as instructional interactions are interpreted as “a site for contesting the status quo” (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000), with students being apprenticed into critical literacy practice (Comber, 2001; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Zammit & Downes, 2002) and enculturated as active citizens in a critical democracy.

Further case studies of teachers or educators who have used such rich texts to support students’ rhetorical agency can be found in Dix and Amoore’s (2010) study around the “linguistic spillover” of texts read to those written, Graff’s (2010) facilitation of student-led book clubs to re-engage adolescent girls with reading, and Wilson and Rennie’s (2019) study of the enhanced literacy outcomes afforded by the incorporation of students’ out-of-school cyber and popular culture knowledge.

4.4 New takes on critical literacy in the early years

Inspired by earlier Australian inroads into implementing critical approaches to texts in early-years classrooms (O’Brien, 2001; O’Brien & Comber, 2000) but noting the criticism of critical literacy in some quarters (see Freesmith, 2006; Winch, 2007) and its lack of explicit emphasis in recent state and national curriculum documents, recently completed research by Cozmescu (2022) investigates early-years teachers in one Melbourne school implementing a unit of work that foreground both critical literacy and Indigenous perspectives. Using data drawn from lesson observations, teacher planning sessions, children’s classroom talk, and artefacts of children’s learning, Cozmescu builds up a vivid account of not only the possibility of teachers undertaking pedagogies usually linked to later years of schooling, but also of how enthusiastically the teaching and learning is experienced by both participating teachers and their students.

Through a concerted cross-curriculum integrated study that linked literacy to critical thinking and critical inquiry, the children in Cozmescu’s study were supported to develop powerful rhetorical resources—more in their oral than in written language, given their still emerging reading and writing skills and understandings. But these resources were powerful nonetheless, as evident in the following transcript of classroom talk. These children (de-identified as Rose, Danni, Nakesh) were discussing the ethical dimension of John Batman’s trade of blankets and other goods for the Aboriginal people’s land. In doing this, they reflect a rhetorical agency and communicative dexterity more commonly identified with much older students:

**Rose**: It’s not fair. It’s not fair. The land is much bigger. The blankets and tools and food that is just this big [indicating size with hands], but the land is big [indicating greater size with hands]. Blankets, tools and food are pretty small. Land is bigger than the school.
Teacher: Does it matter if something is big or small? Or does it matter if something is more important?
Children: More important.
Nakesh: Because they have to live there and get their food there. It was their land. It was not the Europeans’ land. It’s not their land. They should have stayed in Europe and not take the land. Stay back in their own land.
Danni: Yeah, you can’t just barge in. They just barged in.
Teacher: I am going to suggest to you that John Batman saw the Aboriginal people and thought, “They don’t have blankets or homes, maybe that is what they need”.
Danni: Yeah, but he took their land. The Aboriginal people wanted the land and the food, but he barged in and said, “You have the food and the tools”.
Rose: They had been there for 50,000 years.

4.5 Powerful demonstration and modelling

When teachers (or older or more adept students) model language use or literate behaviour, they are essentially performing rhetorical acts that demonstrate powerful ways of communicating. The benefits of classroom modelling have long been advocated in primary language and literacy contexts—from the highly influential work of Cambourne (1988) to advocacy of a gradual release of responsibility (Duke & Pearson, 2002). These precepts have found their way into the practice-based articulation in many curriculum support materials within Australia and elsewhere (Department of Education and Training, Victoria, 2019; Fisher, 2008; Nicolazzo & Mackenzie, 2018). Underpinned by sociocultural theories such as Vygotsky’s (1962; 1978) zone of proximal development and the notion of scaffolded instruction (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), practices involving demonstration and modelling make visible and tangible the language and literacy practices that suit different purposes and audiences (Myhill et al., 2016).

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have only touched on some of the features and aspects of rhetoric that seem to us particularly generative for re-imagining and re-energising language and literacy education in the primary school and the early years. There is much else that might be productively explored along the lines we have traced here. It can be asked: How does rhetoric add value, as it were, to the rich tradition of language and literacy education we have outlined, especially in the latter stages of the paper. As well as offering an opportunity to (re)connect with a body of work that stretches back to Antiquity—truly, an historical resource—and also as reconceptualised more recently, it provides insight into how to understand and use texts to best effect, across modes and platforms. We do things with texts.

What needs particular stress, in concluding, is the notion of rhetorical agency. Central to advocating rhetoric as a new organising principle is that it has the potential to promote agency:

5 There are links to be made here with the traditional rhetorical concept of “imitation” (Hogarth et al., 2021, p. 2).
6 See Green (2017) for some notions that might readily be appropriated and developed for primary school contexts—classical notions such as “invention” and “memory”, for instance, and others such as “imitation”. For those looking to expand their understanding of rhetoric, especially with regard to the contemporary scene, Richard Andrew’s work is well worth following up, in addition to our references here.
an agentive way of being in the world. This is what is now argued for in Sweden, where rhetoric has been explicitly introduced into the school curriculum, albeit at the upper-secondary level: “Its educational aim is to promote rhetorical agency, that is, the capacity to act and effect change by making effective choices about communicative practices, based on an assessment of what is appropriate to write or say in a given situation” (Hogarth, 2019, p. 5). Note that reference is made here to “the capacity to act and effect change”. That seems to us extremely important. Moreover, rhetorical agency is understood as “communicative competency … realized in action, cultivated through training, and ideally manifested in the ability to adapt to communicative context” (Hogarth, 2019, p. 7; cf. Hogarth et al., 2021).

Why should this not be just as relevant for primary schooling? This is surely what we aim for, as literacy educators: to help the children we work with become agents in the world they live in and which they will inherit. We want them to become active citizens, “rhetors”, whose text-work—now and subsequently—makes a difference. Important links are to be made, further, between rhetorical agency, as outlined here, and agency understood in social and political terms—although it needs to be recognised that these do not simply map onto each other. How does the literacy work of the classroom and the school, explicitly conceived and practised as rhetoric, connect to wider manifestations of democracy, citizenship, and agency? That remains a project for all of us.

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Ethics approval  Where examples from research projects are given here, approval was obtained from the ethics committee of University of Melbourne, and adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

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