

Lessons from the Round Table: Literacy Professionals Find Common Ground in Oxford

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Abstract

In July, 2006, Literacy Professionals from across the United States met at Lady Margaret College in Oxford University to discuss research and practice in the teaching of reading and the expansion of literacy. In a tense national climate, reading researchers refer to contrasting theories of teaching reading as “the reading wars,” but at the Round Table on *Reading First*, participants found common ground. This article synthesizes the papers, presentations and discussions of the week using a common framework of understanding that provides some guidance for future directions in research and practice in the teaching of literacy. The six common elements discussed in depth are: the importance of child development in students’ academic progress, the role of culture and lived experience in literacy learning, the social construction of language, the role of the teacher in shaping the conditions and contexts of literacy learning, promoting the active engagement of learners, and the qualities of good literacy teachers. The synthesis displays the research base for the assertions made by participants and argues that there is much that literacy professionals and policy makers can build on toward their common goal of improving literacy education for all children.

Introduction

In the summer of 2006, I accepted the invitation to attend the Oxford Round Table discussion on teaching reading and the expansion of literacy (later called “Reading First”) convened at Lady Margaret College. I went to Oxford to share the results of my research on the effectiveness of computer-based early literacy programs, published in *Reading Research Quarterly* and later awarded the 2003 Albert J. Harris Award from IRA (Paterson et al, 2003). The interdisciplinary group at the “Reading First” Round Table included reading teachers, reading coaches, university and college professors of English and education and literacy professionals engaged in research and activism. Over the course of 5 days, participants presented short, 20-minute synopses of their research or experiences in teaching and studying literacy and submitted papers for further reading and possible future publication. Following each segment, all members of the round table discussed the topics suggested by the presentations. These discussions were lively, often continuing at mealtime or into the evening, and it became increasingly evident that some *shared* understandings would become a distinct bond among us, suggesting that they might also serve as

a helpful framework to support reading teachers and researchers in their efforts to improve reading and literacy education in the United States and other countries.

Crisis And Consensus

In our tense national climate, we still refer to contrasting theories as “the reading wars,” so it was remarkable that for 34 participants in July’s discussions, there was obvious common ground. The exact nature of the reading crisis in the United States was a debatable point, but the end result of the crisis—real or exaggerated led to much congruence of opinion.

Margaret Renner from SUNY, Old Westbury, suggested that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was born out of crisis as politicians despaired over falling literacy rankings for U.S. children, but that response to the crisis resembled a “Triage Experience” when schools are “forced to sort in order to save” (2006).

Myrtle Welch from El Paso Community College added that “The present crisis in reading is a stumbling block to the expansion of literacy” (2006, 1). She reminded the audience that “143 years ago, it was a crime for minorities to read, and now those who do not read are punished. . . Reading is now advertised as a commodity that everyone must possess, and students are measured on the extent to which they possess it”(6).

Jerry Treadway, Professor at San Diego State University and education activist, called for amnesty and constructive action: “Both sides of the reading wars need to sit down, bury the hatchet, and develop a program that includes the best of what both [sides] have to offer” (2006, 3).

Given the Round Table’s mission to spark discussion about issues relating to the teaching of reading and the expansion of literacy, my presentation, entitled, “Why Teacher Proof Programs Don’t Work,” was organized around 33 research-based assertions on learners, teachers

and literacy programming that I felt should make sense to any literacy educator regardless of their research affiliation (2006).

As I reviewed the Round Table papers, I discovered much support for these assertions. Using the 33 statements as a framework for synthesis, I uncovered six major themes that pervaded our discussions and may provide a common ground for constructive discussions about teaching and researching literacy. These themes will not sound “new” to reading and literacy professionals. In fact, they should be quite familiar. What is remarkable, and a valuable result of our deliberations, is that these assertions appeared multiple times in the papers and presentations offered during the week. They are:

- Child development plays an important role in students’ academic progress.
- Culture and lived experience outside of school are inextricably linked with language and literacy learning within school.
- The social construction of language is critical to successful literacy learning.
- The conditions and contexts created and shaped by teachers in their classrooms support successful language and literacy learning.
- Learners engage when they are active participants in meaning construction, personal reflection, and overt demonstration.
- Good teachers of literacy are reflective practitioners, critical thinkers, active learners and action-based researchers who apply their knowledge to their teaching practice.

For this article, I selected and synthesized highlights from most of the presentations and papers offered during the week of Jul 23-28 to illustrate each theme in hopes that literacy professionals and educational policy makers may use them as a framework for reflection about

their own practices and philosophies, reinforcing for some and proposing new directions for others.

The first reference to each presenter identifies his or her full name and school or university affiliation. Subsequent references to presenters already cited refer to them by last name and when appropriate add the page numbers on their unpublished papers distributed at the Round Table. Secondary source citations are also offered as helpful resources for readers.

Child Development

Acknowledging the role child development plays in students' academic progress is important in assessment, planning and instruction.

I doubt that any person who works closely with children would disagree with the statement that children make academic and personal progress at varying rates of speed and demonstrate accomplishment along a progressive trajectory that is rarely the same for all children. Good teachers recognize and respond to the benchmarks of child development and plan instruction to support children's forward progress at the leading edge of their competence. A developmental philosophy of literacy growth and learning encourages curriculum planners to allow students the time and opportunity to practice and employ their developing skills with language. It follows that the diversity of childhood development, would preclude identical results for even the best programming. Most educators and parents would concur that no "one size fits all" classrooms any more than all children of one age would fit into a single size of shoes or clothing.

Renner reminds us that "Children are not products and learning is not linear . . . Growth and development appear over time and not at a predictable moment in time" (2006, 10). Failure to acknowledge children's diverse rates of development may result in negative consequences for

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them and for their schools when they do not meet “average” or “standard” proficiencies. Schools under review fall into a culture of failure (4). Renner compared federal funding initiatives to improve low functioning schools with medical triage and cautions that when schools are anxious to show improvement, they are tempted to focus instructional efforts primarily on students who are *near* benchmark and *can* show improvement, leaving behind children whose development or progress is perpetually lower than minimum standard or whose current functioning is low. She says that sorting and ranking schools and children further exacerbates what Stanovich (1986) described as the *Matthew Effect*. In this case, the “haves” are schools who demonstrate consistent superiority and are invested in maintaining that ranking, whereas the “have nots” are those schools who consistently rank below the average and who risk having even what little financial support they once had taken from them. Students assessed to be functioning below the norm, then, are punished twice for their failure.

Differences in child development and learning pace are often ignored when schools implement highly scripted programs or universal programs in an attempt to raise sinking achievement scores. From studying the history of California’s reading initiatives, Treadway concluded that “policy and implementation are very different things.” Mandates made in the best interest of schools and children, may, in fact, result in rigid adherence to uniform practices. In California, for example, the narrow interpretation of reform policy led to excessive rigidity in curriculum. Treadway calls for greater flexibility in allowing teachers to make instructional decisions for specific students, and a concomitant need for teachers to learn how to differentiate instruction (2006, 3).

Culture And Experience

Culture and lived experience outside of school are inextricably linked with language and literacy learning within school.

Few would question the assertion that children learn in different ways. Critical factors external to the school directly influence language and literacy learning. The home, the neighborhood, family culture and ethnic identity shape each child's prior knowledge and experiences with language. Cultural and familial influences may set the stage for personal learning preferences. Learning is not the sole purview of the school. Rather, it is a lifelong and life-pervasive process, predicated on an individual's ability to connect new knowledge with prior knowledge, thus bringing meaning to new experiences by making sense of them from existing schemata. Linguists remind us that communication begins with shared experience and that the success of communication is directly related to common understanding among conversants.

Cindy Bird from the State University of New York at Fredonia stated, "For many educators, academic competence and linguistic proficiency are not the only goals of formal public education. The empowering of students to be self-directed learners, lifelong learners, independent readers and writers and contributing members of a democratic society are also valued goals." She explained that a narrow understanding of literacy as "reading and writing" does little to represent the lived world that is full of non-text print and semiotic systems influenced by their situational, cultural and locational contexts; "Just as oral language is situated, so too is written language situated" (2006, 3- 4). The literacy teacher's job is to make explicit what is implicit in the many contexts of literacy learning.

For Jean Landis, Director of Literacy Programs at Eastern University, culture "matters" in school literacy practices. She cited Jehlen's (2006) survey of NEA members, pointing out that

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legislative mandates such as NCLB disregard the deeper social problems of poverty, racism, drugs, crime, etc. in the quest to hold all students to the same standard, whereas, “Educators know the outside world is always in their classroom, sitting with the student” (Landis 2006, 27).

Welch posed “a sociocultural view of learning, an emancipatory view of struggle and a critical model of reading instruction,” as necessary theoretical frames for understanding children who struggle to read (2006, 7). Building on Bruner’s (1996) proposal that the mind’s existence can only be comprehended as “situated,” and that meaning making has its origin and significance in culture, Welch adds, “Neither reading nor mind can exist save culture, so when the social act of reading is taught outside of one’s culture, the reading experience is one of struggle” (9).

When children are marginalized by the dominant cultural assumptions of schooling that do not match their own experiences, they may speak out or rebel against rules, regulations, and power structures. The school sees them as “resistant” to learning, but Welch suggests that such children can be emancipated from their marginalized status by culturally responsive teaching, a concept articulated by Geneva Gay (2000). Teachers can learn to use cultural knowledge, experience and frameworks of understanding to provide relevant and effective ways for all students to learn. Culturally responsive teaching capitalizes on the strengths that students bring to the learning experience and is both validating and affirming (Welch 2006, 10). However, this pedagogy must be learned. Jane Andrews from Northwest Missouri State University added that teachers in preservice programs and in-service training must learn how to *plan* for, not simply *react* to diverse learners in their classrooms (2006, 3).

From studying students and teachers in schools with primarily African American populations, Landis pointed out the disparity between African American children’s real lives and those portrayed in books they are likely to read in school (2006, 10). Children quickly

discovered when books that claimed to be “multicultural” do not represent their lived experiences authentically. The end result of a continual dissonance between the values and expectations of the school and the lived experience of African Americans can be stereotypical assumptions on both sides. Ogbu (1993) observed that African American youth still associate school success with “being white,” and Delpit (1995) added that children from non-dominant cultures may choose not to learn rather than ally themselves with the oppressors (Landis 2006, 12-13). Landis believes that the “color-blindness” of NCLB-type mandates does not promote equality because it ignores the reality of racial and cultural segregation and institutionalized racism that perpetuate the imbalances of access to quality education.

According to Delpit (1995), “Children made invisible . . . become hard pressed to see themselves as worthy of notice” (177 in Landis 2006, 13). Time and opportunity for such students to engage with their cultural identities and problem solve conflicts based on their own racial and cultural identities is critical to the validation of their experiences, their language, and their meaning making in literacy learning. McPhail (2005) referred to “the centrality of culture in literacy learning, and the use of literacy as a tool for empowerment and transformation” (20-21 in Landis 2006, 17). In her own studies, Landis observed that adolescent African American boys who were taught in classrooms where balanced literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy were in “high implementation,” enthusiastically engaged in reading multicultural literature both in and outside of school—some even covertly.

Landis asserts, “culture and race matter and cannot be silenced in literacy practices at school” (p. 16). To better engage the lived experiences of children from multiple cultures, teachers should spend time on “grand conversations,” and solicit student interaction while constructing meaning from text. These important questing and problem-solving activities are not

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a “luxury” that waste direct instructional time. They are critical transactions between readers and texts endangered by loss of teacher autonomy through mandated programs whose objective is to promote uniform instruction in all classrooms (in other words, “teacher proof” programs).

Suneetha de Silva from Montana State University, Billings, studied emergent literacy in Native American children in Montana. She became immersed in the lives of young Crow children and their families, resulting in her conviction that cultural heritage and language are intimately connected. She said simply, “Literacy is shaped by culture and language” (2006, 3). For the Crow, stories passed on through generations teach values, culture, and language, though modernization has devalued the role of the elders in transmitting the rich cultural heritage of the Native experience. De Silva suggests that teachers are important “elders” who can either reinforce cultural messages or create confusing contradictions that force Native children to “choose” between school culture and the lived experience of their families and tribes. Because most public schools transmit the values and expectations of middle class mainstream culture, children from contrasting backgrounds are devalued and easily marginalized. Parents, says de Silva, must learn along with their children. She employed parents and community members to assist in creating simple books for young children in both English and Crow languages, and continues to study the impact of such direct linguistic parity on the literacy development of early emergent readers in the Crow community.

Similar to the power of culture, the experiential nature of language development and literacy in general was extolled in many of the papers presented. Nancy Jurenka from Central Washington University used the metaphor “Growing Readers and Writers with Garden-based Learning,” to show the “centrality of experience-based literacy” in teaching young children (2006, 1). She summarized, “Readers bring their life experiences, background knowledge,

culture and language with them as they interact with an author via the author's text" (3). Jurenka applied the language experience approach to the creation of a children's garden as a vehicle for literacy learning. Such rich, long term, experiential learning says Jurenka, provides "fertile soil" for building complex vocabulary, and influencing comprehension skills as children plan, experience, read about, talk about and reflect on gardens and gardening.

Connecting children's lived experience with the author's message is the goal accomplished by sharing children's literature. Evie Tindall from Regent University School of Education in Virginia explained that the power of the story has ancient roots in history and has been established in all cultures as a way to entertain, educate and transmit culture, history and values. Teachers may be considered guardians of this powerful tradition:

As educators, we have a responsibility to carefully choose the best of stories and to skillfully present them as precious gifts in a setting where the power of story can be released in its fullness. This setting is an honored space where teacher and students enter the story, experience the story, and linger in an unhurried quiet and respectful time of wondering (*Powerpoint presentation, 2006*).

Suellen Alfred from Tennessee Technological University, who researched the use of children's literature in cross-curricular settings, described how stories "embedded in the literature of everyday life" are a natural resource for teaching mathematics (Haury 2001, in Alfred 2006, 6). She argued that the undisputed value of language and concept building through children's literature is predicated on its inherent ability to motivate, provoke interest, connect to lived experience, promote critical thinking and provide contexts for problem-solving. Further, as children participate in stories, they "try on" characteristics that may have a positive impact on their goals and values.

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Experiential learning and the arts was researched by Shelby Wolf from the University of Colorado. In a presentation based on her work recently published in *Language Arts* entitled, “The Mermaid’s Purse: Looking Closely at Young Children’s Art and Poetry” (2006), Wolf shared the results of a two year study of *Creative Partnership* based at the Arts Council of England. Preschool and early primary age children work with resident artists who engage children in “serious seeing,” a visual and emotional link to seeing symbolically. Wolf explained, “Encouraged by their teachers and adult artists, children learned to look closely at the sign systems of art and poetry to open up worlds of image creation and metaphor making” (10). She marveled that in the United States, the arts are seen as “expendable,” whereas in British education, the symbiosis between the arts and humanities is understood to be *essential* to language learning and critical thinking.

Working together with teachers, British artists help provide children with “powerful opportunities for cognitive work as well as imaginative play” (18). In one project, four- and five-year-olds were taught how to use photography to do some “serious seeing” around the sea as a central theme. Their photographs then became the basis for extraordinary poetry which was scribed by their teacher. Older children worked on creating “spy boxes” using the art of assemblage to build three-dimensional visions of the sea. These were accompanied by oral recordings of their poetry, all of which became a traveling show in England.

Wolf quoted Maxine Greene (1995) who says that creative artistry does not result from “seeing things small” (16 in Wolf 2006, 20). Children who are small already can learn to remain open to possibilities since they already see many things “close up and large.” Such “seeing big” is a prerequisite for understanding and constructing poetic language. Programs like this one that marry experiential learning with language construction do more than teach essential skills. Wolf

stresses that these children participate in what Siegel (1995) described as “transmediation” among alternative sign systems. “Moving from one sign system to another is deeply engaging work, for one must look and look again to see if the meanings created in one system are explaining and enhancing the meanings in the second system (in Wolf 2006, 18). She despairs with Robinson (2002) that too many older children and adults insist that they are *not* creative, when more accurately, they may never have had the experiences they need to learn *how* they are creative (Wolf 2006, 20).

Social Construction And Shaping

The social construction of language is critical to successful literacy learning.

Social interaction is essential to language acquisition and literacy learning. Naïve learners require experts and peers to assist them to construct knowledge, to learn and practice the structures of the language, and to monitor and shape their acquisition of skills and strategies as they grow toward mastering the sound and symbol systems. Dynamic interaction between literate adults and children at critical points in the development of literacy is an essential element of literacy acquisition (Paterson et al. 2003). The social interactions involved as adults read to and with children are a necessary and natural vehicle for transmitting an aesthetic appreciation for how written language connects with lived experiences, expresses thought, and helps us all make sense of the world.

Social construction of language learning in classrooms is a complex dance between the literate adult (teacher) and the naïve learner (student). For example, teachers model and solicit student engagement with language and literacy activities. Then, learners offer their approximations of skills and strategies followed by teacher and peer response which may take

the form of reinforcement for correct approximations, or may require more linguistic exchange as teachers scaffold or reshape and solicit new responses.

Good teachers of literacy deliberately solicit discussion and reflection from students, and design activities to promote metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness before, during and after reading, writing and oral interchanges. In study after study, increased literacy learning was evident in classrooms where the use of language for authentic purposes in a social context was observed (Paterson et al. 2003).

Predicting, scripting or inhibiting teacher responsiveness may actually constrain rather than support literacy acquisition for the language learner. Landis cautioned that “school sanctions (fueled by NCLB) . . . reduce student learning to a test score and literacy to a teaching method. . .” (2006, 2). Working as a literacy coach, Landis was a participant observer for two years in three schools in a large urban school district. From her observations in fifteen kindergarten to grade 2 classrooms and 3 additional years of teacher interviews and classroom observations, she testified that manageable class size and teacher autonomy to design instruction improved children’s creative constructions through authentic, inquiry-based learning.

When these same schools were required to institute a state mandated, scripted and controlled literacy curriculum, the balanced literacy program from which teachers had begun to see improvement was disrupted, leading to the disaffection of highly qualified teachers, and declining interest in reading among students. An African American teacher quit the school district, discouraged by the number of times she had been “written up” for using thematic, multicultural literature-based units instead of following the scripted program. Child casualties included distressed students whose response to testing was, “I am stupid,” and who told Landis “Reading is dumb” (2006, 7).

Parents, too, are important partners in children's literacy development. Unfortunately, not all parent/child interactions in every culture promote language development that will help the children with the language of school (de Silva 2006, 3). In studying the familial roots of language development in the Crow, de Silva was alarmed to see that cellular phone usage had practically eliminated the verbal and nonverbal interactions between young Crow mothers and their babies. According to de Silva, development of linguistic competence in both the expressive and receptive forms is necessary for success in mastering the way meaning is communicated through symbolic language. By including parents and significant Crow adults in constructing simple bilingual texts, de Silva brought adults and children into closer contact and engaged them in shared experience, the groundwork for effective communication.

The impact of explicit teaching on meaning construction is a critical dimension of adult-child interactions. Without opportunities for language proficient adults such as parents and teachers to make the operating rules and conventions of language explicit to inexperienced learners, implicit structures, nuances and relationships in text are often lost to young readers. Timothy Morrison from Brigham Young University proposed a model for teaching inference to build comprehension. Based on Keene and Zimmerman (1997) who explained that comprehension results from a reader's ability to make connections text to self, text to the world and text to text, Morrison adds that teachers can demystify *within* text inferential thinking by modeling and thinking aloud to show young readers how skilled readers do what they do to make meaning (Morrison 2006, 2). By engaging students in wondering aloud and questioning inferences within a text, teachers show students how to find inferential clues and construct meaningful relationships among words and concepts, gradually letting the students take control of and eventually internalize the process.

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Bird asserted that by helping students become consciously aware of the multiple literacies of their everyday lives (metalinguistic awareness), adults give students the power to shape and rule their command of language in all of its forms. Teachers must make explicit what is implicitly known to skilled language users and should allow students to explore the many languages they hear and use in and outside of school. Students learn through experimentation and exploration when certain constructions are socially appropriate. When they gain control of how to regulate their own language(s) for the task at hand, they have mastered code-switching, a metalinguistic skill particularly necessary for children whose primary discourse is not entirely compatible the “school-based” discourse of the dominant culture. Such metalinguistic awareness is particularly helpful for student writing.

Teacher scaffolding of student-constructed achievement was discussed at the Round Table. Deborah Coffey from Kennesaw State University studied tutoring as a vehicle for improving teachers’ ability to scaffold and shape learning. She engaged her graduate teachers in tutorial experiences to give them opportunities to apply appropriate techniques to scaffold learning. Teachers in the study reported greater confidence in their ability to focus on and adapt instruction for the individual child and to arrange their classrooms to facilitate opportunities for greater adult to child interactions with individual children, peer to peer and cross-age tutoring (2006, 12).

From another study, Coffey reported the positive results of using literature circles on 3rd grade students who were assessed to have poor comprehension skills, little appreciation for literature and negative attitudes about reading. While certainly enhancing the aesthetic experience of reading, literature circles and book clubs are ideal settings to engage students in the social construction of meaning, vocabulary exploration, and critical thinking. As students

gained control and ownership of their learning through rich peer led discussion of high interest, readable literature, Coffey saw evidence of leadership and independence in readers. She quoted one student who once described reading as “words on a page,” but following his experience in literature circles, now describes reading as “finding the author’s message” (2006, 13)

Creating Conditions And Contexts

The conditions of learning and the contexts created and shaped by teachers in their classrooms are critical to successful language and literacy learning.

The quality of teaching and the classroom environment are critical to successful literacy learning, especially in the early grades. Good teachers construct contexts, manipulate the environment and adapt curriculum to assure optimal conditions for learning that facilitate active engagement from their learners. Good teachers know how to choose *and* construct curriculum that incorporates systematic instructional planning and progressive scaffolding of skills acquisition.

Literacy facilitating teachers evaluate the success of their teaching and student learning, and adapting their instructional plans in response to continuous assessment. They encourage questioning and incorporate time and space for students to test hypotheses about meaning, correct misconceptions, try different strategies, practice developing skills and solidify new learning in low-risk conditions. Indeed, any program, technologically advanced or systematically designed, can be used effectively by effective teachers because they have *already* structured their classrooms to address children’s cognitive, social and emotional development and incorporate *learning-centered* practices in everything they do. Repeatedly, researchers report greater gains in reading and writing achievement might be obtained by focusing on creating classroom

environments in line with good literacy practices than in adopting programs that compensate for the absence of such conditions (Paterson et al. 2003).

Andrews described how she teaches preservice teachers to plan for instruction of students with diverse learning needs. As Ortiz (2006) observed, students' success or failure in school is largely the result of a "mismatch" between the learning environment and student learning needs. Andrews uses "parallel lesson planning" techniques with her preservice teachers to help them learn how to modify the conditions, processes and products of learning not simply in response to learner failure, but before such failure results (in Andrews 2006) .

Technology is a valuable tool to enhance the active engagement of learners in this our "digital age." Hiller Spires from the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University offers teachers these "Principles to Teach by in the Digital Age:"

- Keep up with what is going on . . . stay informed.
- Give your students access to the technologies
- Allow students to be co-creators in the learning process.
- Seek out professional development opportunities and learning communities that will help you learn how to orchestrate learning experiences with new technologies.
- Teachers become more important in the learning process through their role change (2006).

Polly Van Raalte from the Lawrence Public Schools offered a profile of an exemplary school program where everyone contributes to their claim that "The love of reading permeates the entire building" (2006, 11). In addition to well-designed curriculum, the contextual factors that contribute to the school's success include:

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- A principal who was a former literacy coach and reading specialist
- A reading program based on literature and supplemented by skills building programs
- A complete array of teaching methodologies that include language experience, direct instruction, guided reading, leveled books, and writing and reading workshops
- Consultant specialists from Teachers College of Columbia working with staff and curriculum development
- Home-school connections with individualized book choices for each child
- Complete team planning with classroom teacher, reading specialist, resource room teacher, gifted and talented teacher, and other support staff meeting regularly to assess progress and adjust instruction
- A “case-work” model with children assigned to individual teachers for continuous assessment of progress
- Formal and informal continuous assessment and incorporation of evaluative scores for grouping and placement
- Focused “events” with reading as the theme (Van Raalte 2006)
-

Learner Engagement

Learners engage when they are active participants in meaning construction, personal reflection, and overt demonstration.

Engagement in learning is a choice that students make to be active participants of meaning construction and personal reflection under conditions of learning that promote such activities. Learner engagement takes many forms, but in literacy learning children understand more about how reading works, more about how letters and words work, make better attempts at

reading real text, and can apply their literacy learning to new situations when they are taught in classrooms where they are given time to work on such tasks and where teachers construct literacy events that employ high levels of student engagement in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Choice is an important element in promoting self-motivation and self-efficacy. Practice, risk-taking, metacognition, reflection and responsiveness are all elements of active learning. Good teachers direct, facilitate, guide, assess, shape and respond to learners in ways that help learners transform new experiences into internalized understandings.

The appearance of increased learner engagement through attractive or entertaining programming does not necessarily lead to increased skills learning or transference of skills from such programs to authentic contexts. Children in classrooms where teachers facilitate children's active engagement in instruction demonstrate gains in reading and writing achievement regardless of the published literacy program and/or supplemental materials in use (Paterson et al. 2003).

Welch stressed the important of tapping into cultural knowledge and student strength to engage learners in constructions that have relevance to their lives. Blaming students for the very conditions that cause them to struggle does not to correct what is actually interfering with student performance (2006, 11). Their struggle, she says, does not result from deficiencies in the student, but in the failure of the school to engage that student. This may result from "culturally depleted and structurally directed pedagogy," that diminishes readers' natural inclinations toward learning over time. As a result, learners disengage and are left farther and farther behind (14-16).The importance of dividing the student's own agency from the school's responsibility to set up favorable conditions of learning is understood from the debate in research literature regarding the

term “remediation.” According to Klenk and Kibby (2000), the “remedy” metaphor implies that struggling readers themselves can and should be “fixed.” Instead, Alvermann (2003) places the responsibility of “re-mediation” on the school where the conditions of learning must be revisited when inappropriate or ineffective mediation between reader and text results in struggle (in Welch 2006, 12-13).

Renner protests the illusion that finding the right methodology will resolve the problems of all disengaged learners. Reading research resounds with the admonition that one method does not fit every learner’s needs. However, the constructive processes of reading must be explicitly taught. When learners participate in guided practice under the strategic instruction of expert teachers who know how to collect data on the success of student learning and to respond meaningfully, active engagement builds literacy skill (p. 12).

Dugan articulated evidence that effective reading instruction requires both teachers and students to engage in deliberate actions (2006). Teachers help students develop a purpose for reading and enlist students’ prior knowledge. They think aloud and make reading visible. They participate in spontaneous “wondering.” They engage students in talking about meaning and extend their thinking. Students seek relevance and connect to their lived experience. They engage in socially constructing meaning, accept and offer wonderings and respond aesthetically. Students think on paper and extend their thinking beyond the text. When teachers are skillful at strategic scaffolding and students all participate in discussions and wondering, even less skillful readers (as judged on tests) do not appear less skillful.

Alfred described how pedagogy that employs literature circles for high interest, content-related novels in teaching math, science and social studies provides opportunities for even those with limited proficiencies in the content itself to profit (5).

Spires made the case that digital technologies require 21st century students to learn differently. To succeed in the workplace replete with technology, students must learn how to deal with ambiguity, to handle complex communications, to be metacognitive and to learn how to give up one strategy to try another. Whereas the concept of an educated person once involved the mastery of a canon of knowledge, today's effective entrepreneurs must know how to access and use information and demonstrate that they can efficiently learn new skills. On the subject of engaging today's digital generation, Spires quoted Marc Prensky, "Rather than being empowered to choose what they want and to see what interests them and to create their own personalized identity—as they are in the rest of their lives—in school, they must eat what they are served" (2006).

Good Teachers

Good teachers of literacy are reflective practitioners, critical thinkers, active learners and action-based researchers who apply their knowledge to their teaching practice.

In each of the previous five major themes, a key component of success is the presence of knowledgeable, skilled, artistic teachers. Round Table participants had many ideas about how to assure the development and supply of good teachers.

First, good teachers study their pedagogy, practice the craft of teaching with diverse children and bring an individual artistry and style to their studied ability to create the conditions of learning that actively engage learners. Good teachers set goals to accomplish learner outcomes, adapt instruction to student needs, and enrich learning experiences by capitalizing on the most teachable moments. At sensitive points in the process of modeling, practicing and feedback, teachers must make decisions, shape instruction and interact with students in ways that

scripted or highly regulated programs do not accommodate. Good teachers know how to choose *and* construct curriculum that incorporates systematic instructional planning and progressive scaffolding of skills acquisition. Good teachers direct, facilitate, guide, assess, shape and respond to learners in ways that help learners transform new experiences into internalized understandings.

As with student-based programs, teacher training programs do not produce equal results: good teachers adapt and modify programmatic elements to produce successful learning outcomes whereas less skilled teachers over-rely on published programs and/or co-opt elements of instruction that undermine results. Skilled teachers are *observed* operationalizing and consistently demonstrating best practices in teaching literacy whereas, less skilled teachers often tell researchers that they “value” such practices, but were not observed demonstrating them in daily instruction.

Renner protested the distortion of teacher accountability measures into punitive actions against teachers and schools, a cautionary tale repeated by Landis who urged schools to avoid participating in “autopsies of failure” for students considered at-risk. Rather they should build “visions of success” (Delpit 1995). Renner suggests that teachers themselves are already capable to participate in effective action-based research of their own practice since they must continually gather data to inform instruction and pose critical questions to guide instructional planning.

Kristen Pennycuff from Tennessee Tech University studied the impact of professional development on emergent literacy instruction. To determine if explicit training in best practices as defined by the Reading Excellence Act (REA) would promote, inhibit or not effect literacy instruction, she analyzed data from teacher and principal interviews and classroom observations. She concluded that teachers who participated in training based on best practices in emergent

literacy express more familiarity with, value, and are observed to apply emergent literacy concepts to their practice more often than teachers who do not receive the training. She recommended that for such training to lead to successful results, collective participation is vital, transfer of skills must be planned, scaffolded and monitored, and impediments to professional development should be identified and eliminated (2006).

The demands of today's diverse classrooms require the teacher to be flexible, to know how to adapt instruction and to be adept at accommodating learner requirements by modifying instruction (Andrews 2006). Coffey found that teachers developed more responsive and flexible ways of adapting instruction to individual children following their experiences engaged in tutoring. Van Raalte (2006) attributes the success of her school largely to the collaboration of classroom teachers and support teachers under the enlightened leadership of a principal who is knowledgeable in literacy research and teaching.

Multiple participants reiterated that teachers must learn how modeling, scaffolding, and context shaping affect learning. Both Morrison (2006) and Bird (2006) emphasized the importance of teaching explicitly about language. Students move toward internalizing strategies practiced under an expert guide. Morrison referred to this as the "release of responsibility model," from Pearson and Gallagher (1983). Jurenka (2006) emphasized how the teacher must provide common experiences for children, and then capitalize on the language learning opportunities that devolve from vivid shared activities.

Wolf (2006) reminded the Round Table that educators are not solely found in teaching universities. Her studies of British artists engaged with young children points to a broader vision of who is "teacher" and how many significant adults may guide children as they learn.

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Renner summarized the critical importance of good teachers in resolving the reading crisis:

There is no one method that will solve the reading crisis. What we do know is that teachers make the difference. The difference is a decision made by a teacher who knows the research and how to apply it. The difference is the learning environment created by a teacher so that all children can learn. The difference is an instructional judgment made by a teacher at the right moment when learning is taking place. It is a decision made by a teacher who understands growth and development and uses authentic assessment to document it. It is not scripted learning that requires only literacy levels of comprehension (2006, 11).

Conclusion

What, then, might reading professionals and educational policy makers gain from the presentations and discussions at the Oxford Round Table on reading and the expansion of literacy in July of 2006? The themes I have synthesized from our deliberations suggest common ground for the many stakeholders involved in teaching reading and expanding literacy for all children. If literacy professionals do not make every effort to begin constructive action in literacy teaching based on some shared understandings of how literacy facilitating teachers can assist children to learn, we run the risk of having our power to shape learning and improve schools taken from us. Treadway cautions, “At critical times, if the educational establishment fails to heed the public’s concerns about the schools, the public will take control of the schools, usually with far-reaching effects” (2006, 2). By coming together in that unique English town

dedicated to the pursuit of academic advancement, American educators have, at least for the moment, found much they could agree upon.

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