A Guest Essay

LEARNING LITERACY LESSONS

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According to Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984), educators can learn literacy lessons from the stories teachers tell about children's uses of written language. They argue that descriptions and analyses of what children are trying to do with written texts should direct educators' attempts to develop environments that support literacy. Theirs is a powerful perspective, one that places the power of theory building and the responsibility for literacy development in the hands, hearts, and heads of lesson participants—teachers and students. Language stories should yield literacy lessons.

Recently some concerned citizens have written publicly to criticize teachers, schools, and state officials for considering whole language philosophies. Their letters to the editor, editorials, magazine and newspaper articles, and subsequent lobbying efforts have influenced state and federal legislators' speeches, policy statements, and legislative amendments. Their writings appear in print and at school meetings from Maine to Arizona, from Montana to Florida, and from California to Washington, D.C. More than just attempting to discredit whole language, these people argue that early, systematic phonics is the only scientific, practical, and moral method of teaching anyone to read and write.

I believe educators of all philosophical convictions can learn valuable literacy lessons (and perhaps political ones, too) from the language stories in and around public writing. By looking at the intent as well as the content of their efforts, educators can draw conclusions about how we might ourselves use literacy to participate in the debate about how literacy should be taught.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor are an important tradition in civic writing (Stotsky 1986). Citizens express themselves in response to particular articles and editorials, or to a newspaper's lack of coverage of specific topics or events. Most often the author is a local citizen providing a view different from those expressed in the newspaper. In the case of schools or districts considering whole language alternatives, however, this is not always the case. Letters from across the country frequently appear on local opinion pages to defend intensive phonics or to lampoon alternatives. These letters do not pull their punches.

For example, Patrick Groff, a retired education professor from San Diego, exchanged a series of letters in a Maine paper, the Boothbay Register, with Nancie Atwell, a former Boothbay teacher. Groff's first letter, published on October 26, 1989, comments on Atwell's withdrawal eighteen months earlier of a proposal to assist local teachers in using children's literature as the foundation for their literacy lessons because some members of the school board had made it clear that they thought the teachers incapable of delivering such a program. Groff begins: "The reluctance of the Boothbay School Committee in 1988 to accept $50,000 in materials and services offered as an inducement to establish a 'whole language' program of literacy development in its schools has come to my attention." He goes on to comment that the school committee is "wise" to be reluctant because "the ideology [sic] held about reading instruction by WL advocates like Ms. Atwell have [sic] been demolished in large part by the scientific data on this teaching." After a response from Atwell in which she wondered aloud why Groff was writing so late from so far away on a matter no longer under consideration, Groff again responded (January 4, 1990) with "congratulations" for "the courageous stand of Committee members" against "Atwell's dubious scheme." In this second letter, Groff aligns himself with Marilyn Adams's (1990) Beginning to Read, which he cites as Phonics and Beginning Reading Instruction with a 1989 publication date, and adds that he writes to distant local newspapers because "national educational journals at present will not print negative criticisms of the WL suppositions."
A similar letter from Marshall Kaminsky, an educator from San Francisco, appeared in the News-Argus in Lewiston, Montana (January 6, 1988), criticizing the local school district’s cross-grade reading program. Kaminsky took exception to the journalist’s positive tone in the original article about the program and wrote that “it was really a story about dismal failure.” According to Kaminsky, fifth graders, who worked in the project with high school students, shouldn’t need help with their reading because “children should be able to read, spell, and comprehend every word in the Declaration of Independence by the end of second grade.” The reason for the failure was that Lewiston teachers were using “the useless and destructive look-say or the whole language method” instead of intensive phonics, “the only reading instructional method that works. . . . It worked for our forefathers and even our current president [Reagan].”

Articles and Editorials

Newspaper and magazine articles about reading instruction are rare. Most often, they touch on celebrity initiatives (Mrs. Bush’s efforts to fight illiteracy) or recapitulate standardized test scores for local districts or the state. Because these media rarely consider reading, it warrants careful consideration when they do.

In July 1989, The New American, “a spokesman for activities of the American Defense Fund concentrating in content upon internal security matters vital to your well-being,” published an article by William Jasper entitled “Half-taught with Whole Language.” Jasper charged that whole language is a “top-down campaign devised and promoted by the professional ‘reading wreckers’ of the International Reading Association.” Citing Maran Hynds, the President of the Reading Reform Foundation, Jasper reports that “whole language is a revised version of the old look-say, sight word method which is basically responsible for the decline of literacy and the increase in reading disabilities in America.” He continues: “Because of this teaching, millions of students develop the well-known symptoms of dyslexia, that dreaded learning disability that condemns capable, bright students to lives of mediocrity.”

On August 23, 1989, the Christian Science Monitor published an opinion piece by Martha Brown, Illinois co-chairperson of the Reading Reform Foundation, that associates whole language learning (“a method adopted by thousands of schools in the ’80s”) with a decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and an increase in the number of school dropouts. According to Brown, the problem is so severe that “even in upper middle class districts 25 to 30 percent of public elementary students [sic] need remedial help.” To the typical list of whole language advocates—education professors, professional journals, and professional organizations—Brown adds unions. At the end of her piece she calls for parents “to bring sense (phonics) back into the classroom before whole language becomes the epitaph for education reform.”

Newsletters

“The purpose of [the Blumenfeld Education Letter] is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in four ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically—and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce those risks.” Editor (and sole author) Samuel Blumenfeld devoted the March 1989 issue of his Letter to “The Whole Language Fraud.” In this issue he presents an overview of whole language and offers commentary on the work of Kenneth Goodman (someone who treats “English as if it were Chinese”), the International Reading Association (“virtually the entire reading establishment . . . are [sic] controlled by proponents of look-say and whole language”), and the Marie Carbo/Jeane Chall exchange about Chall’s Learning to Read (1967) (“Bravo, Professor Chall”). Blumenfeld extends the blame for the “problems of dyslexia and functional illiteracy,” however, to include elementary school teachers—many of whom were themselves taught to read by look-say and are semiliterate.

Blumenfeld gives special attention to France Alexander, Associate State Superintendent for California. First he reminds his readers that Alexander announced the California Language Arts Initiative toward literature-based literacy programs and then quotes her statement to the press about the impact of the California Board of Education’s unanimous approval of a policy to strengthen the teaching of evolution. Blumenfeld draws two conclusions: “Between evolution and whole language, there is no telling what kind of damage will be done to the minds and souls of the children of California . . . and how can anyone have confidence in American public education when the ‘experts’ in charge exhibit such ignorance, arrogance, and evil intent.”
The U.S. Congressional Record

On October 23, 1989, Congressman Joseph Brennan of Maine read a letter from the Camden Herald into the Congressional Record. The letter, published in the Camden paper on July 6, 1989, was written by Charlotte Iserbyt, an employee of the Department of Education during the Reagan administration. Brennan said he must read Iserbyt’s letter to Congress “for the sake of our Nation’s economic, political, and social prosperity.” The following are selected quotes from the Congressional Record.

Is the failure to teach our children to read and write not the most important civil rights issue facing our nation today? Shouldn’t we attack this civil rights problem with at least the same vigor we attacked racial discrimination in our society?

Whole language—look say method of reading instruction must be stopped dead in its tracks if we truly want to cure the nation’s illiteracy problems.

The reason for our nation’s illiteracy is that the social engineers and so-called reading specialists in the International Reading Association have for the past 60 years been busily at work changing the methods of reading instruction from the tried and true intensive phonics to look-say/whole language.

Because unknown to them, the deindustrialization of America, with its accompanying transfer of millions of American jobs overseas, has allowed the social change agents to redefine literacy and to call for new teaching methods, such as whole language and the use of elementary students of calculators [sic], better suited to the needs of an information/service oriented society.

Write your congressman and ask them [sic] to put a hold on the new NAEP reading test, scheduled for administration in 1990, pending an investigation of its alignment to a single discredited method of reading instruction, whole language. Nonpartisan citizen action on this extremely important civil rights issue is vital for the survival of our free society.

U.S. Senate Policy Statement

Senator William Armstrong of Colorado issued a report on September 13, 1989, entitled “Iilitacy: An Incurable Disease or Educational Malpractice?” as the Senate Republican policy position on reading instruction. The report seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of early reading instruction, and it offers much of the same criticism of reading experts, professional or-

organizations, and publishers as Groff, Blumenfeld, and other critics. In fact, some of the text of the report is identical to the Blumenfeld Educational Letter. Beyond the similarities, Armstrong reports that “historically, all American school children were taught to read. . . . It seldom, if ever, occurred to teachers to give children word lists to read, or to make beginning readers memorize whole stories as today’s proponents of the whole language approach recommend . . . Frank Smith, Kenneth Goodman, and Edmund Huey, all well-known, vociferous, dedicated, dogmatic enemies of early intensive teaching of phonics.”

After offering an endorsement of the Reading Reform Foundation, a nonprofit association developed for the promotion of phonics instruction in American schools, Armstrong provides a cost analysis of federal literacy programs from the 1960s to the present (which he estimates at $65 billion) and makes four recommendations. First, “there should be a moratorium on the establishment of new federal programs to prevent illiteracy, until an assessment is conducted to determine the effectiveness of those programs already in existence.” Second, the study of beginning reading that Congress approved in 1986 (P.L. 99-425, Sec. 901) should be conducted, complete with cost/benefit analyses of all commercial programs and methods. Third, “in some cases the federal government provides funds directly for reading instruction (prisons, military, job training, Chapter 1, bilingual programs, etc.) . . . in these cases, teachers should be required to be trained in intensive systematic phonics.” Fourth, “governors should be encouraged to propose state legislation requiring teachers to be taught intensive systematic phonics as part of their training to teach in public schools.”

The National Literacy Act of 1989

On February 6, 1990, the U.S. Senate passed legislation (S 1310), which established procedures to coordinate federal literacy programs, increase workplace and job training literacy programs, establish and strengthen family intervention programs for literacy, distribute books to families and agencies, and develop student and public literacy volunteer programs. According to Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, the act’s primary sponsor, “As a nation, I believe that we must ensure that all those who need literacy services will receive them—without being subjected to a waiting list, inaccurate assessments, overcrowded classrooms, or inferior programs taught by poorly trained adult educators. The
National Literacy Act of 1989 is intended to achieve these objectives” (Congressional Record, February 5, 1990, p. S 730). The act received rhetorical support from many senators, who linked illiteracy with the economic, social, and political collapse of American society.

Five amendments to the act were proposed, including requests for changes that would allow funding for Parent as Teacher programs, literacy assistance for commercial truckdrivers, and Native American Even Start grants. Senator Armstrong of Colorado presented two amendments. The first was to include at least one classroom teacher ("whose expertise on 'what works' in the classroom will be invaluable") on state literacy councils, a provision of Title 1 of the act. In support of this amendment, Armstrong offered four sentences. But for his second amendment, which he labeled "reading instruction in phonics," he offered selected references from research reports, a selected list of phonics programs, reports of two school districts using phonics, and the entire Senate Republican Policy Statement mentioned above. He stated that "for too long we have been unwilling to deal with the root cause of the problem of illiteracy in America and that is the flawed methods we have used to teach our children to read" (p. S 738). "If we apply the recommendation of the years of research and retrain our classroom teachers, we can eliminate illiteracy before the year 2000" (p. S 739)." In his press release of February 6, 1990, Senator Armstrong reports that because of his amendment, federal money can "be spent to train teachers in phonics instruction." 

The Content of These Language Stories

Although, typically, Harste, Woodward, and Burke do not comment on the content of the stories their young informants tell, I would be remiss if I overlooked the content of these documents in order to analyze only the intent, style, and process with which these writers made their points. I will ignore the more extreme statements of criticism (school teachers are semiliterate, comparison (Goodman, Smith, and Huey are more dogmatic in their beliefs than Chall, Adams, and Flesch in theirs), and praise (the courageous stand of school board members who champion intensive phonics), because such statements do not further the debate on literacy and literacy education. But I will make brief comments on statements about whole language, phonics, and the accused advocates of whole language, because these are important parts of the debate.

Even casual readers of professional journals should recognize inaccuracies in the statements about whole language philosophies. As Altwerger, Edelesky, and Flores (1987) explain, the great debate between look-say and phonics is over word recognition, not reading. A whole language view of reading is "not one of getting words but of constructing meaning" (p. 148) by using graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic cues in the text and the context of the reading. Treating whole language philosophies and look-say as synonymous is a distortion of the facts.

In addition, there is considerable evidence that methods derived from whole language philosophies are effective with young children (Pinnell, Fried, and Estes 1990; Winter and Rouse 1990) and for entire populations (Guthrie 1981). Although there is evidence that suggests that instructional methods affect how children learn, I know of no evidence that connects teachers applying whole language philosophies to the development of learning disabilities or dyslexia. Finally, the association of whole language and evolution presents a curious problem in logic. If Blumenfeld believes that whole language should be rejected because it is unscientific, then on what basis should evolution be rejected?

Many of the statements made in favor of phonics are historic inaccuracies and scientific exaggerations. Blaise Pascal did not invent alphabetic phonics as Senator Armstrong claims in his Senate position paper; the method predates him by many centuries (Mathews 1966). Before the twentieth century, not all students learned to read, word and syllable lists were featured in early phonics textbooks, and memorization and drill were the primary means of learning at school (Finkelstein 1971; Smith 1987). There were no "good old days" when all Americans were literate—not even in the upper and middle classes, about which Brown worries. During a public meeting at the 1990 International Reading Association Convention, Marilyn Adams, who is cited extensively in many of the pro-phonics documents, stated that "the Armstrong, Blumenfeld, and Brennan reports simplify the arguments about reading and overstate the case for phonics.... I never said that the debate [about early reading instruction] is over or that every student needed phonics instruction. I did not say or write that." Finally, it is misleading at best (dis-
honest at worst) for Senator Armstrong to say that a switch to intensive phonics would eliminate illiteracy in America by the year 2000 (see Kozol 1985, upon whose work the National Literacy Act is based). Moreover, it is dishonest to imply that literacy will necessarily bring employment and prosperity since there are not enough jobs for every illiterate American.

In many of these documents the critics imply that someone, some group, or something is preventing intensive phonics instruction from being taught in schools. The International Reading Association is a favorite target, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress a new one. The IRA does make considerable amounts of money from its association with textbook publishers, but this revenue would not disappear even if all classroom teachers switched to phonics. As is obvious, publishers will produce whatever materials bring them profit. They have demonstrated the ability over the last several decades to repackage their wares (Durkin 1987), and they will continue to do business with the IRA because it brings large numbers of teachers together. The writers' claim that economics explains IRA bias lacks credibility.

The argument against the NAEP is just as spurious. In fact, the Reading Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English, of which I am a Director, refused to participate in the national testing project because they thought the NAEP committee lacked effective advocates of positions other than intensive phonics. They feared that the NAEP tests would lead to a national curriculum based on intensive, systematic phonics. And according to the Congressional Record of February 5, 1990, Senator Simon objected to Senator Armstrong's original amendment for phonics instruction because it was intended to establish just such a curriculum. Despite Senator Armstrong's claims, the final wording of his amendment included many alternatives to phonics for teaching reading.

Literacy Lessons

What can educators learn from these stories? These documents represent an excellent example of how a group interested in literacy has used effective political writing to promote its beliefs. And they have been successful in spreading the word. Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of their work is the obvious coordinated effort behind it: How else would national letters come to local newspapers? At each level, from local newspapers to the

Senate floor, there is a singularity of message and method. I don't see the coordination as a conspiracy, but rather as a confederation of like-minded citizens who seek to change reading instruction in public schools by using their literacy as it is intended to be used—to make a difference in their lives. I think there is much here for literacy educators to learn.

First, these writers don't just talk among themselves, as literacy educators at every level often do. Although it is clear from cross-citation that they communicate with each other, they recognize that teachers and school administrators do not make decisions about reading instruction by themselves. Accordingly, the writers have broadened the audience for their writing. They address parents and taxpayers in order to persuade them to accept their viewpoint and to act on their behalf in local schools and districts. They attempt to gain the ear of school board members in order to get their issues on the board's agenda and keep them there. And they follow the money and power of local, state, and federal elected officials.

Second, these writers have increased the number of outlets for their work. They send letters of support and condemnation to local newspapers, national magazines, school boards, business executives, and members of government. They write articles for some of these same sources and for hand-to-hand circulation among local support groups. They also write policy statements for local candidates for office as well as for state and federal legislators. Lately the Congressional Record seems to be a favorite outlet, conveying immediate legitimacy to their position.

Third, the simple, plain style of these documents is effective. Sentences are clear declarations of the benefits of the author's position and the liabilities of all others. Although these writers frequently refer to science, they use none of the jargon and very little of the qualifications and explanation of procedures that often accompany scientific reports. Rather, they blend personal and case-study anecdotes with the emotional appeal of a tragedy reversed. Most effective is their effort to present themselves as the persecuted underdog populists fighting against big business, special interest groups, big government, and intellectuals.

Fourth, the timing of their writing is instructive. These writers are proactive in their efforts to get their message across when literacy education is not on local, state, or national agendas. Then they write to ask various audiences why they are not concerned about this "neglected civil right" or to alert those who have already accepted their position to possible threats on the horizon.
These writers react quickly to such threats when they do occur, as the Iserbyt letter about NAEP attests. Finally, they are relentless in their efforts, as the Groff-Artwell exchange in the Boothbay Register demonstrates. Even when the threat is gone, the writing comes to ensure that it will not return.

Fifth, these writers extend the context usually associated with discussions about literacy education. They explain how their position is not just better for individuals, or even children in general. Rather, their position is important for society at large. Despite oversimplification, distortion, and hyperbole, they attempt to articulate an economic and political argument for why literacy is important and why their vision of literacy education will improve life in America. Since this is at least part of the reason for schooling, this kind of rhetoric and logic is important in gaining the attention, if not the support, of those not directly involved in education. These writers offer their audience a reason to believe in their cause.

To learn the literacy lessons from these stories, we must follow Harste, Woodward, and Burke’s lead and separate story content from literacy process. If we do, the lessons show us what literacy and democracy are all about. They teach us that literacy can serve real purposes beyond momentary pleasure or getting on with the functions of our lives. They demonstrate that through reading and writing, individuals can make their voices heard by those who rarely listen and affect society in ways they believe appropriate. And while some may not appreciate the message they deliver, they are engaged in a legitimate and, from a literacy educator’s standpoint, admirable democratic tradition, one in which we all might participate. We have their invitation.

References