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ABSTRACT

Ways in which schools can develop the lively arts of language--listening, speaking, reading, and writing--through furnishing a learning ecology, is the focus of this paper. The establishment of a learning ecology is described as being based on the primacy of talk. In this context, teachers must personify the ways in which talk joins people. The methods used by teachers in creating common human bonds can include improvised drama, classroom discussion, choral speaking, and telling stories. To teach children how to read literature so as to gain its highest satisfactions, a planned program is said to be of prime importance. The elements of such a program are described, and its advantages enumerated. Listening is said to be a precondition to writing in that it helps the student to know how the words should go. The teacher's approach to teaching the child to write creatively is described. (DB)

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The Lively Arts of Language in the Elementary Schools

William J. Iverson

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William J. Iverson

The term "lively arts" usually refers to drama on the stage, in the motion picture, on television or radio. But I want to use "lively arts" to encompass a larger theater. Language, it seems to me, is a "lively art" in all its uses. Language carries life artfully even in the most pedestrian exchange. The casual greetings we pass to one and all, the idle chit-chat we employ to protect ourselves from our friends, the guarded phrases we grasp to keep strangers at a distance—in short, language, which in a hundred ways keeps private the true feelings we do not wish to bare—language still is a lifeline we fling in the human stream to keep us afloat.

Such is language all life long, but surely language is never again so lively an art as during childhood. For it is then that the first reaching out comes and the first intimations arise that there are fellow travellers aboard. Joy can be shared, and sorrow, too. And what a sustaining revelation that is. A child learns he is not alone and language brings him that primal message. The nuances of sound give substance to tenuous feeling—carry it out to the one and back from the other. St. John had it right when he said, "The Word was God." There is a divinity in language which enables human beings to touch one another at the heart of life, now and across the centuries.

There is then no greater privilege held by the school for childhood, the elementary school, than the opportunity to nourish language early and well. We who are teachers in the schools mold malleable substance. The way in which we who are teachers listen to children lets them know whether there is a fellow human being here or an alien nothing. The way in which we who are teachers talk to them lets children know whether there is true charity there or a deceptive tongue, a sounding brass. The way in which we who are teachers read to them lets children know whether there is promise there or an arid land. The way in which we who are teachers write to them lets children know whether they dare risk themselves or must pen safe emptiness. Listening,

speaking, reading, writing—the lively arts of language—should sustain children. The schools ought to develop the art to reach out to life and the grace to take it in again through the revivifying word.

In this reaching out and taking in through language, children define themselves. Language resonates far beyond the sounds children voice or the utterances they hear. The sounds and utterances reverberate within and tell children who they are. Children try a word, a phrase, a larger piece of discourse. They watch the responses they get with an intense, persisting vigilance. They listen raptly to what others say to them. They string the beads of language in and out in a thousand and one patterns. And soon they learn which pattern evokes a smile and which a frown. That learning is one of the great miracles of childhood. No one knows why children are able to acquire this virtuoso talent. Not the linguists, who put it to some mysterious inherent competence. Not the psychologists, who think it must be learned "somehow." Neither is able to account for the miracle in any definitive way. So there is no point, as of now, in speculating about why children can define themselves so wondrously through language. Let us just be grateful they can. Let us furnish the kind of learning ecology in our schools for childhood which sustains rather than stultifies.

How shall we establish this kind of learning ecology? We begin by recognizing that we need to base our environment in the primacy of talk. James Britton of the University of London makes the point graphically: "Talk is the sea on which everything else floats." I know the point is not new. Otto Jespersen, the great Danish linguist, said in 1933:

> In our so-called civilized life print plays such an important part that educated people are apt to forget that language is primarily speech, that is, chiefly conversation (dialogue), while the written (and printed) word is only a kind of substitute—in many ways a most

> valuable, but in other respects a poor one—for the spoken and heard word. Many things that have vital importance in speech—stress, pitch, colour of the voice, thus especially those elements which give expression to emotions rather than to logical thinking—disappear in the comparatively rigid medium of writing, or are imperfectly rendered by such means as underlining (italicizing) and punctuation. What is called the life of language consists in oral intercourse with its continual give-and-take between speaker and hearer.[1]

No, the point is not new. But the fact still remains that "talk is tucked in between the nooks and crannies of the curriculum," to use again the telling language of James Britton. Talk is still viewed as a kind of filler among the solid pieces of learning. We seem to think that ability to listen and to speak will just sift in naturally while we bring to bear all our strength raising each new piece into place in the structure we call the curriculum. Yet a moment's reflection makes it clear that we continue to misplace our energies. Unless a child has built for himself a real place among his fellows through "the universe of discourse," as James Moffett calls it, no amount of devotion to the solid pieces, the social sciences, the natural sciences and mathematics, will help him to survive.

If we have based our learning ecology on the primacy of talk, how must we act? First, we must as teachers personify the ways in which talk joins people. We must articulate ideas and feelings with warmth and honesty. We must tell stories whether we are in the first years of school or the last. We must let the language of story exemplify all the creative potentialities of our mother tongue to relate people to one another. But, more important, in the ordinary exchange between teacher and child, we must let the unifying feelings shine through: joy and despair, laughter and sadness. A teacher who does not talk with fulfilling humanity

conditions children to soundproof mind and spirit. Children close themselves off and withdraw into life-robbing isolation.

Second, as teacher-learners we must join the children in creating the common human bonds which language helps to fashion. One of the best media for this joined-creating is drama—especially improvised drama. The improvisation can be either in an effort to recapture the spirit and substance of a good story or a fine poem or in an attempt to play out the feelings and issues of human relationships. In either case, language gains reality and impact which ordinary classroom interchange simply does not effect. Improvised drama permits a free exploration of the potentialities of the intonations, sounds, and rhythms of language. The speaker who loses himself in the drama no longer is inhibited by the expectations he feels when he is speaking in his own name. If he is normally retiring, in drama he can try being aggressive. If he is big of voice, in drama he can try being soft of speech. He can extend his life space in a hundred different roles. He can achieve an emotional release from the experimentation, sensing the power of the spoken word to stir, to calm, to anger, to mollify. He can be swept by the unpredictable dialogue into trying to find language suited to the feeling context which has that very moment arisen. He can lend tonal vestments to word and utterance in a driving desire to feel attuned to the nuances of relationship being projected. He can, in short, rise to a new perspective on the ways language both facilitates and denies human communality.

I have suggested that this playing out of human interchange be a joined-creating. I meant to invite us who are teachers to be in the middle of the drama—not every time but at wisely chosen intervals. We as teachers can lose ourselves too in the play and thereby show candor in language which the teaching role often inhibits. We can reassure children who find it difficult to lose themselves in a role that we too can be angry or grief stricken. We can be stupid or foolish, wicked or uncouth. The play's the thing—it supports a larger honesty than ordinary discourse per-

mits. Of course, teacher participation does have to be selective. We must not be in every drama. We must only occasionally play a leading role. We must not dominate; we must facilitate. Still if we join the creating now and then, we reinforce the sense of community through language that will spill over into other classroom interchange. As James Moffett says:

> Drama is the most accessible form of literature for young and uneducated people. It is made up of action; and the verbal action is of a sort we practice all the time. A kindergarten child . . . can soliloquize and converse, verbalize to himself and vocalize to others. No written symbols are required. Drama is primitive: not only does it hit us at the level of sensation, affect, and conditioned response, but it seems in all cultures to be virtually the first, if not the first, verbal art to come into being, because it is oral and behavioral and functional, evolving out of real-life activities, such as propitiating gods, making rain, and girding for war. Indeed, a number of modern trends, such as happenings and the anti-play, have exerted force to return drama to a communal actuality.[2]

One of the interchanges desperately in need of the humanizing spill-over which improvised drama can create is classroom discussion. Most of what is called discussion in schools is not discussion at all but simply a kind of guessing game in which children try to stumble upon what we as teachers want. And what we want may be only a repeating of memorized and unrelated facts. Real discussion is joined when an issue arises and honest differences are held. Then there is no ready-made decision about what is right and what is wrong. Discussion is entered to clarify the differences in points of view and what the differences imply. The differences may or may not be reconciled. What is important is the process where ideas and feelings are rubbed against each other.

Children learn to respect differing values and in the exchange clarify their own. They learn that others can be quite adamant in holding positions which seem to them, at least at the outset, quite indefensible; yet they may be good friends, excellent playmates, superb in a thousand other human ways. Surely respect for such honest difference is critical to survival of a democracy. Where can children learn how to differ about an idea or a feeling and yet retain full respect for a person as a human being? Certainly one place ought to be the elementary school.

Essential to such genuine discussion is size of group. It is only rarely a whole class can enter into true give-and-take. Everyone must have a go at the issue if real discussion is to be joined. A group larger than about a half dozen simply diffuses this kind of continuing personal engagement which true discussion demands. But then we teachers are used to working with a number of small groups, each pursuing a different course.

Even in the small group, the issue to be confronted must be real and of immediate as well as of long term importance to the children. The persisting ethical choices we all face typify the kinds of issues which really impel committed discussion. The basic problems—honesty, responsibility, fairness, and a thousand others as old as man—need to be worked over anew by each generation. After all every one comes fresh at one time to the old questions. Am I my brother's keeper? Canst thou by searching find out God? Each young person must make his own answer. In the making of his answer each child needs an open hearing among his fellows to know what values he does hold and what may follow from these positions. He thus gains perspective on what is often not quite consciously held, or if consciously held, often never subjected to any kind of public scrutiny.

One final illustration of the power of the voice to mold idea and feeling can be found in choral speaking. We can use uncomplicated choral verse to make real to the ear poetry's sounding appeal. We stand with John Ciardi who once wrote:

> For years I have read poetry as a sensual act, sounding each word and cadence in my head and often saying the lines aloud in response to a moving passage. Good poetry . . . carries with it a notation as detailed and as specific as that of music. . . . Like music, poetry gives signals to indicate its own tempo. emphasis, pauses, stresses, modes, and moods; like music it must be taken as indicated. To speed up either one [music or poetry] simply for the sake of speed would be disaster. The best conductor is not the man who gets the orchestra through a score in the shortest elapsed time . . . The best conductor is the one who leads the orchestra through the score in the most sensitive way. . . .

Our zeal for choral verse is tempered by our desire for long-term affection for poetry. We do not overdo it. We are content when children who rebel at solo recitation are lured into speaking poetry. They give voice under the persuasion of the group while at the same time they are granted protective anonymity. Gradually within the group they learn the feel of rhythm and sound and imagery. We do not endanger this slow-budding sensitivity by pressing too grimly toward performance effects. The principal end desired for the children is not performance for others but satisfaction for themselves.

Indeed in all these teaching strategies we place our greatest faith in what children do for themselves: telling stories, dramatizing, discussing, choral speaking. We place in an ancillary role—important but not enjoying first priority—those activities where the initiative, the shaping, and in fact most of the doing is by others. For example, no one denies the power of the media in our time: television, motion picture, other projected material, radio, recording. But we try to remember that the power is best employed if it is a stimulant and not simply a tranquilizer. We see that if the media are completely fulfilling, if they do all the work and leave the children semi-comatose, they do not serve well.

Instead we seek always—whether in television, motion picture, recording—to use the medium primarily as incentive. We want the children to assume the initiative, the shaping, the doing. The production facilities which can be brought to bear on a television program, a motion picture, a recording are awesome indeed. The temptation to the producer is to let the medium take over and leave no room for the children to respond.

Especially, if the medium is used to project literature we do not want the medium to be so compelling that each child does not respond to the literature in his own unique way, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, in his own imagination. We do not want to coerce absolute uniformity in response. The prime invitation of literature is to add creatively out of each imagination to that which is only suggested. No literature should ever be presented through any medium so comprehensively that children cannot add individual imaginative extensions. There is never only one correct response in literature. The medium must not make it seem that what the medium represents is the only right way to respond and that furthermore it has done the whole job. It is absolutely essential in literature that each child know he can and should respond with his own image, each image different yet true to the spirit of the writing. If children feel they must yield to responses completely supplied by the medium—every child's response completely paralleling his classmates'—then attraction to individual reading in literature is reduced, not enhanced. Each child must feel he has the privilege—and a proprietary interest in—giving his own responses to the invitations he senses in literature. So we use the media. But we keep their power in proper perspective.

Indeed whatever we do to engage children in the lively arts of language, we remember that the key word is "perspective." Whatever we do, we want to help children know where the lasting power of language is. We try to avoid anything that subverts the private discoveries each can make.

When a child is able to read he adds a new capacity for

making these private discoveries. For as Richard Whitlock said in 1654:

> Books are life's best business. Vocation to them hath more emolument coming in, then all the other busy terms of life. . . . They are for company, the best friends, in doubts, Counsellors; in Dumps, Comforters; Time's Prospective, the Home Traveller's Ship or Horse. . . . The Mind's Best Ordinary, Nature's Garden and Seed-plot of Immortality.[4]

The wisdom of Whitlock's words rings as true today as it did over three hundred years ago. Indeed the wisdom may be even more relevant today than when it was composed.

Literature speaks with an ageless tongue. We teachers look out every day at young faces. We want somehow the time we are together to make a difference. Yet neither you nor I are possessed of infinite wisdom or even unbounded cheer. Every age renews the old doubts about values. Perhaps no age has been more torn than ours. But the anxieties are not new. In literature the best that has been thought and said is ready to stimulate thinking, to sharpen appraisal, to refine judgment.

Of course, it is not enough just to have books around however solid the literature. At long last we have come to know that we must have a planned literature program to teach children how to read literature to gain its highest satisfactions. The key words here are "program" and "teach."

"Program" means that materials are selected because they develop solid literary appreciation. "Teach" means that the distinctive literary qualities of the selections are revealed through systematic instruction.

We must not make the mistake of assuming that basic skill-building selections can serve as literature. If a story is chosen or adapted for skill-building, it cannot also serve as literature. Let us be grateful if a skill-building story indeed does lend itself to

phonics, structural analysis, or some other word identification skill. Let us be glad if such a story indeed does show the kernel patterns of the English sentence. Let us be happy if such a story offers models of paragraph organization. But let us not for a moment confuse skill-building with appreciation-building. Skill-building stories are chosen with a different end in view and if we are fortunate they serve that end. We can be certain that such stories do not build appreciation for literature.

If we truly want literary appreciations, we must select stories, poems, plays, biographies which stand in their own right as literary exemplars. Every selection must stand as a model of its own literary form. A fine writer's diction cannot be corrupted to furnish drill in word identification. His style cannot be subverted to provide practice in predication. His structure cannot be stripped to stress proportionate paragraphing. No, if we want appreciation for literature to become for children "life's best business," then we must read a selection as it was written. It must be as free and full and unconstrained as the writer intended.

But how do we develop through such selections ability to read literature with appreciation? We must have, I repeat, a clear and workable program. We must show in our program what the qualities of good literature are. We must take time to teach for the high joy only literature can bring.

Now let us see the way in which such a program in literature functions. First, the program encourages the young reader to take a new attitude toward words. We know he must recognize *what* a word means. That he learns in his skill-building work. But in literature he must go beyond *what* to *how* and *why*. *How* does a word call upon appreciative response? Is it through the word's very sound? A word may buzz or hum, or even sing. Is it through the word's rhythmic beat? A word may stroll, or march, or even dance. Is it through the imagery which the word flashes upon the imagination? A word may call to the eyes, to the taste, to the touch, indeed to all the senses. So in literature, it is *how* a

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word means that makes the impact.

And similarly, a young reader of literature must learn *why* a word was chosen. *Why* did a writer wish a sounding word at that point? Or why did he wish rhythm? Or why imagery? The diction of a writer is a crucial key to appreciation of literature. It might be taught through a program in literature. And we must take time to teach for it.

Second the program in literature encourages the child to take a new attitude toward connected discourse. In skill-building work he concentrates on literal comprehension where conformity in response is prized. In literature he concentrates on appreciation where individuality in response is encouraged. The privilege of individual imaginative elaboration is basic to appreciation. Each child must become his own artist when he reads literature. Out of what each lives, knows, feels, and cares about must come a response only he can make.

In addition to encouraging this creativity in response, the program in literature must make clear the potentialities in response for each literary form. The possibilities are different in story, poem, play, biography. We must help the child to identify these potential satisfactions. Is a story marked by artful suspense? Is a poem distinguished by superb rhythm? Is a play illuminated by crackling dialogue? Is a biography highlighted by sharp contrast? The child must be alerted to whatever the appeals are. For that is the beginning of appreciation.

Moreover, the child in a literature program must learn to use the ideas and vocabulary of appreciation to discuss these distinctive literary appeals. The ideas and terms are neither difficult nor unduly extensive. Attempts to avoid literary ideas and terms not only result in confusing circumlocutions but also actually diffuse appreciation. From the beginning the young reader must be taught the same ideas and vocabulary of literary discussion which will be employed at all levels of his education. We have never done young readers a service by delaying to the high school years

the ideas and language of literary appreciation.

This kind of a program in literature has distinct, observable advantages. First, it makes clear what appreciation is. Literary appreciation is too often both nebulous and neglected. Second, it provides a vocabulary which will clarify and focus literary discussion. Third, it builds an approach which young people can use as long as they read literature. Fourth, it increases appreciation because the program focuses on the qualities of literature which lead to pleasure. Fifth, it adds security because the teaching approach makes clear what to discuss in literature, how to discuss it, and why differing readers may derive differing satisfactions.

Shall we not begin? Shall we not have for children a full-fledged program in literature? Shall we not take time to have the young well-read about what has been, about what might be? Shall we not take time to have young people share the enduring wisdoms? The poet George Crabbe wrote:

> This, books can do;—nor this alone;
>
> . . . .[5]

Now let us reach for the culminating lively art of language—the art of writing. We speak of writing as the culminating art

because the principal source of both incentive and skill in writing is experience as it is shaped through listening, speaking, and reading. If we teach these language arts emphasizing the appeals to the individual experience, we point the way to better writing.

Listening is a precondition to writing. The effects of language well told and well read are pervasive. A great variety of language ought to be heard. Listening helps a student to know how the words ought to go. Similarly there is lasting influence of speaking on writing. A child who masters even modestly the art of telling a story or discussing his point of view hears better how to say what he wants to say. That is especially true if he has taken his budding art to a new clientele. He may be a third-grader and try his story on the first grade. Or he may be a sixth-grader and with some cohorts carry on a panel discussion for the fourth grade. These speaking experiences will clearly show in the art of his writing.

Similarly a goodly store of remembered reading guides the pen. A good reader conducts a dialogue with the writer as he reads. Reading is no passive process. Affirming, qualifying, identifying, rejecting, supporting, denying as he does, the reader is sharpening his own linguistic tools for writing.

When children begin to write, they are trying to make something new for themselves. They are trying to relate experiences previously unrelated. In so doing, they are deliberately reopening experience. They try to give this new sense of the experience shape and focus. When the new view of experience matters to them, they work hard and unremittingly. They soon learn that creating is not all joy. They strive for their own sense of symmetry, harmony, even elegance.

In very early writing, when a child is dictating as part of a group, it helps to have an immediate involving experience: a pet animal in the classroom, a new baby at home, an improvised play. But imaginative reworking of never-never land can also be quite as involving. Whatever the group dictating focuses upon,

it helps to have time to plan and to talk. It helps to be able to recast and revise until all are satisfied. It helps to have an audience beyond the immediate group who composed the writing. Another class would do. Or a copy could be proudly sent home for all the family to view.

As a child begins his career as an independent writer, he needs increasing support. Personal conferences are usually more helpful than written commentary. That way a sensitive teacher can tell at once how much advice would be liberating and how much would be constricting. Quick amends can be made for treading on what may be especially dear to the young author. If comments are written, even more compassion should guide the pen—and economy, too. It is rarely wise to attempt complete reformation of character through one script. After all, there is something terribly concrete about writing, both for the child and for the teacher. For the child the written word is much more threatening than the spoken. The written word stays there. The child commits himself in writing and it stays there. A spoken word dies away. The written word stays there.

So we as teachers ought to preserve the right of the child to throw away. Not every effort of the most skilled writer is successful. The wastebaskets of professional writers bulge with discarded writing. A child should not be forced to polish his failures. True, we must help some children recognize small successes. No child must come to feel everything he writes is only fit to throw away. But some throwing away, both for those with large and for those with modest talent, is truly creative, for the discards let them try afresh.

And that willingness to risk the ego again is crucial to writing. Otherwise, long before the high school years children learn to play it safe. They may not commit many offenses against accepted usages. The spelling may be almost perfect. But they say nothing.

We would not be misunderstood. We know well if writing

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is to be viewed publicly—placed on the bulletin board, sent home to the family, published as it were—then the mechanics must be in order. But that consideration should intervene much later, not in the act of creating.

In writing, as in all the other lively arts of language, we do want to keep alive that personal act of creative human interchange with others. We do not want children to absent themselves while the hand mechanically drags itself through a meaningless exercise. We want a child's writing to be as identifiable as his speaking. Indeed writing should be a child's other voice. As Robert Frost once said:

> A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that saves prose from itself.[6]

Indeed we want to lend our every effort in the schools for childhood to save all the lively arts of language from the "sing-song." Language which is sing-song, language which is mechanical and divorced from the person, is no language at all. What a child hears, speaks, reads, or writes must be deeply a part of him and in turn makes him deeply a part of the larger human family.

That is what we meant when early in our discussion we said that through language children define themselves. If we who work in the elementary schools do not help children to define themselves, we fail them during the shaping years, when the basic sculpture of the person is hewn. We dare not fail. In these times of all times, we dare not fail. For through all we do to help children develop the lively arts of language we must always be asking, with John Goodlad in *Saturday Review:*

What kinds of human beings do we seek? But even before looking toward where we want to be, perhaps we should ask fundamental questions about what we are. . . . To what extent is each individual developing a deep sense of personal worth—the kind of selfhood that is prerequisite to self-transcendence? To what extent are our young people coming into critical possession of our culture? And to what extent are our people developing a mankind identity—an identity that transcends all men in all times and in all places?[7]

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