DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 714 CS 006 706

AUTHOR Mamchur, Carolyn
TITLE "Heartbeat": A Holistic Approach to Reading.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Anaheim, CA, March 20-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Creative Activities; *Creative Teaching; Elementary Secondary Education; *Holistic Approach; *Reading Instruction; *Student Needs; *Student Teacher Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Ashton Warner (Sylvia); *Organic Teaching

ABSTRACT

Four true stories reveal how teachers used Sylvia Ashton Warner's ideas of "organic teaching" and "key vocabulary" to reach apparently unreachable students. The essence of the organic method of teaching is that it touches those things very deep and very real within the child. Teachers who can remain comfortable while taking the risk can use the same organic principles found in the infant room where Ashton Warner first unfolded her theory: of listening for the key to unlock the unconscious; of patient, caring, careful listening; of using the basic instincts of the teacher to flow with, not against, the children; of using the power of destruction and turning it to creativity; of using nature, song, music, and dance; of using touch and taste and sound and every natural element available to open doors and broaden experience to allow one experience to move and flow into another. But a word of warning: the basic principles of organic teaching can only work if they are enhanced by the natural artistry of the teacher. There is no method. (JL)

HEARTBEAT

A Holistic Approach To Reading

-Sylvia Ashton Warner visits the high school.

Paths to Literacy

The literacy bug has bitten North American educators. They itch from complaining professors, worried parents and too many "Johnny Can't Read" reports. Their crops are nipped in the bud by English placement, functional literacy or minimal competency tests.

Pressured and threatened, teachers reach frantically for the can of Raid, the calomine lotion, the speller, the grammar text, the magic marker labelled "diagnostic" "prescriptive" "remedial".

Too often the classroom takes on the pulse of urgency, of "you must," of "they can't, and of "do it." Too often left hemisphere thinking dominates, all becomes linear, factual, functional. Too often we forget there is more to reading than the translation of symbols on a printed page. Too often we forget to listen to the *natural pulse of each child. . .*

PATH ONE: THE MASK

Rhonda bumped into things too often. She tripped over her own feet. Her legs seemed too long and too thin and much too wobbly.

She rarely spoke in class, rarely looked anyone in the eye. Questions forced her to hide, tipping her face, small and pale into a veil of thick, black hair. Her school records indicated Rhonda's ability to be "Poor, but difficult to assess, as Rhonda lacks motivation."

At first the grade tens stared, some snickered. It didn't take long before they began to completely ignore her.

Miss Forest refused. She may not have yet reached Rhonda, but she refused to ignore her. She kept involving Rhonda in the activities, straining to hear the soft voice, encouraging any sign of response. One Tuesday morning, after two months of seemingly futile coaxing, encouraging, listening, Miss Forest handed each class member a sheet of white paper. She played "The Rites of Spring" by Stravinsky. She passed out cans of bright paint. "Please make a mask." She busied herself at her own mask.* The music became a little frantic. The teacher, in a sudden silent communion with the child, felt a smear of red paint touch her own cheek. As her hand moved toward her face, she glanced up and stared into the eyes of a wildly grimacing girl. Sweat appeared on Rhonda's upper lip, her hair lay damp against her cheek. There was a smudge of red paint on that cheek. Rhonda had created the most awful, awesome face Miss Forest had ever seen produced by a child.

On impulse Miss Forest decided to dismiss the class. Having the advantage of teaching near a large park in a town yet untouched by the "let's sue the teacher" mania, Miss Thompson invited her students to go for a walk by the stream. She even offered to clean up their paints. As Rhonda got up to leave the young teacher dared a chance. Taking the child's hand, she drew Rhonda back to the mask.

"Tell me about it. What does it say?" Softly.

"I saw you shoot them. My mother and that man. I saw you, father, I saw you shoot them." The words were very audible. The voice didn't tremble. Rhonda stared Miss Thompson straight in the eye.

---

*For specifics on the use of masks, refer to Jezic, 1980

The teacher put her arms around Rhonda's small shoulders. She held her close. There would be a time later for words, for writing in the journal, for more painting. And there was.

The tones changed to pastel; the medium became water colour; the masks were soft silk; the music Debussy's "Sonate pour violin et piano." "Let's wear the masks. Let's dance as we do sometimes for drama relaxation,* just free form dancing, but wearing our masks."

The curtains had been drawn, as black as the teacher would have had for a film showing. In the soft lights of an old tri-lite fitted with small red and blue bulbs, she could barely recognize one student from the other. Yet one did stand out. One form moved with an exquisite dignity and subtle freedom Miss Thompson had never seen in this group before. Small white hands flew in sweeping motions through the air. Black hair flowed from side to side as a thin, but ultimately graceful body swayed to the music.

It was the first time she had seen Rhonda dance. It was not to be the last. In the next two years Rhonda delighted the whole school with her dancing on grad nights, talent nights, special event days.

A flower had bloomed.

Another change Miss Thompson could happily record in the accumulative record sheet was that all "reading" and "motivational" problems disappeared.

The method? Patience, listening, caring, mask making, journal writing. Long walks, soft talks, patience, listening, music, dance. Did I mention patience? Listening? Caring? Perhaps I should also mention what Miss Thompson did NOT do. She DID NOT say, "Rhonda, speak

---

*For specifics on this method, refer to Way, 1967, p. 112-117.

up, you're mumbling again." She DID NOT say, "Rhonda, quit hiding behind that hair, and stay with us, for God's sake." She DID NOT give detentions, or lines, or ridicule for unfinished work, for daydreaming moments, for half-spoken ideas, Yes I guess I did mention patience, listening, caring. Only through MONTHS of setting the stage of genuineness, of trust, could Rhonda's mask speak to Miss Thompson. Only then could the child speak to the woman, and could the woman hear the words.

Perhaps this is what Rogers (1967) calls the "prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities. The facilitator's prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational expression of his essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism" (p. 109).

The method? Key Vocabulary

> CHILDREN HAVE TWO VISIONS, THE INNER AND THE OUTER. OF THE TWO, THE INNER VISION IS BRIGHTER.

(Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 21)

PATH TWO: DEAD BABIES

Harry talked plenty. Plenty often, plenty loud. Plenty irritating. Harry did little. Too damned little.

Failure smeared itself in smudges across the faces of Harry and his teacher, Mr. Thompson.

I.Q. 140. Achievement level D-. This made Harry an under achiever, a far less forgivable sin than being a poor achiever.

The teacher had listened. Listened, not only to Harry's endless conversations about music, but to that God-awful Alice Cooper screeching "Dead Babies" on the record player, lovingly purchased by the school board to bring classical music to the 11th grade.

Mr. Thompson had suggested contract after contract,* "How about a history of rock 'n roll?"

"Nope."

"An analysis of the lyrics in Cooper's songs?"

"Nope."

"A biography comparing Cooper to Zappa."

"Nope." I'll do the test on Kim. It's O.K. Forget it."

He failed the test, mumbling about not being able to READ it. When Mr. Thompson returned the test to Harry, he also handed him a movie camera (another purchase coaxed from the local school board).

"SHOW me Dead Babies!"

And he did. Gruesome. Awful. A three minute film brilliantly made. The class applauded when they viewed it. Harry grinned and shrugged.

Thompson couldn't stop Harry after that. The boy made films based on The Lord of the Flies, MacBeth and scenes from Coney Island of the Mind. He eventually started writing his own songs, poems, story scripts. Harry organized a school club, "The Movie Makers," and taught other students his interest and his art. He became teacher.

---

*For details on contract teaching, refer to Gibbons, M. Phillips G., 1979

The method? Patience, listening, caring, music, contract teaching, patience, listening, accepting, trusting, a movie camera, a film budget, short stories, novels, plays.

The method? Key Vocabulary

> I MAKE MISTAKES OVER THE CHOICE OF THESE WORDS ON OCCASION. . . AND THERE ARE PITFALLS LIKE COPYING, MOOD, REPRESSION AND CRIPPLING FEARS WHICH BLOCK THE ORGANIC EXPULSION OF A WORD. BUT YOU GET TO KNOW ALL THESE AFTER A WHILE AND THERE COMES IN TIME, SOMETIMES AT ONCE, AND SOMETIMES LATER ON, A REGULAR FLOW OF ORGANIC WORDS WHICH ARE CAPTIONS TO THE PICTURES IN THE MIND.

(Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 45)

PATH THREE: THE TESTER

The film idea worked so well for Mr. Thompson that the English teacher assigned to a group of "these ARE impossible grade eights." decided to use it as a main tactic herself. She had a reputation for "believing in kids." She would need the strength of her convictions. She would also need a few lessons in film making. She got them from Harry.

"Group interaction." She had always claimed, "is the key to good classroom teaching." She believed it then. She probably still does. . .

> "when you have companions, you have more courage, don't you? . . . We know we are no longer alone. . . but many together."

(Rogers, 1980, p. 318)

Believing was not achieving. The class went for long walks, they shared good food, experienced eight group process exercises from Pfeiffer & Jones, (1974). But nothing clicked. The group was uneasy, uncomfortable, couldn't let relating happen.

"It's the drugs," announced the French teacher. "All those damn kids take drugs."

That part was true. And it was a real problem. But there was more. And Mrs. Russell hadn't yet put her finger on it, hadn't yet heard the "key" word. So she tried a group project, tried a "let's put the books away and all do one thing -- let's write a movie script and then let's film it."

They shouted, yelled, whispered ideas as the teacher furiously wrote words all over the blackboard. Scripts began to emerge, to be erased, to change, evolve, develop. The issues: death, drugs, deceipt. This was no easy story. It was large and frightening. It was filled with fear and . . . guilt. Mrs. Russell trembled, trying hard to hear what those ideas had to be telling her. Nothing. The class began shooting the first scene. A "regular" drug party, an accidental overdose. They shot, they waited for the film to come back. Nothing. They tried again. This time she heard it -- just that strain of tension in the voice as the words flew at her. "What we need in our story is a tester."

A tester, one who tests the dope. One who gets free dope when it comes to town, because he tests it -- to see if it's O.K. Is it too weak to be effective? Is it too laced with poison to be safe? Will the tester get pleasantly stoned? Mildly disappointed? Blind?

Using. Being used. The tester.

No one looked at Duane. The room was too quiet. Mrs. Russell let the silence rest there. She let it stop there. She didn't turn around, just wrote the word on the board. New Character -- tester-.

The dash meant "who would play the role?" The dash meant Mrs. Russell was wondering if she could handle the drama that was unfolding before her. She remembered studying with Dorothy Heathcote. She remembered the promise Heathcote makes in using drama:

1. To give children an opportunity to examine their own living problems with a new perspective;
2. To tell the truth as she knows it;
3. To show it is important to listen;
4. To accept, support, and then challenge decisions the class makes;
5. To bring to the teaching situation an energy level equal to that of the class.
6. To show any student the direction in which he or she is going.

(Warner, 1976, p. 226)

And "by consciously using her own values as her touchstone, Heathcote taps the energy of the human spirit." (Wagner, 1976, p. 230).

She didn't erase the dash.

"Hell, I'll do it."

From Duane.

A week later, from the principal, "Lorraine, you've been working on that film for over a month now. You've hauled those kids everywhere in that old bus you somehow talked me into okaying. And that's fine. But just what are you teaching them?"

It was a good "principal" question.

"Communication skills?" Mrs. Russell checked out for his approval.

"Go on," the principal nodded.

"This week the class interviewed a Bishop, who gave us permission to use the Sacred Heart Cathedral, wear his vestements, use the golden, jewelled chalice for wine and unblessed hosts for Holy Communion.

Also interviewed the local mortician -- who showed the whole process of preparing a body for the graveyard. The boys spent over a week there. One even has a part-time job working at the funeral parlour now. Our students were not only impressed. They were impressive! (These, the town's "bad" kids, the drugers, the "school - or jail" gang).

Next the class interviewed the local cattle rancher. We needed a barn scene. We had an outdoor supper with him one night, we rode horses and spent until midnight around the fire listening to the old boy tell stories. I've never seen those kids so relaxed.

Visual literacy? Interaction skills? Group management? Responsibility? Pride? Film technique? Editing? Oh, did I tell you they've written their own music? Did you know these kids have a band? Want to hear it? We're having a parent's night next Thursday. I thought it would be more meaningful than a mark on a report card. I've already sent a letter."

In her latest book, Becoming a Teacher, Wasserman (1981) writes a letter to parents. .

> "to judge a youngster with respect to an arbitrary standard is, to me, a flagrant compromise of my own standards and professional ethics. Moreover, as I attempt to put these mandated symbols into the little boxes, it is more and more evident not only do these not tell the story of your child's progress, but they are, in fact, misleading (p. 801).

I guess that says exactly how Mrs. Russell felt that day.

The principal touched Mrs. Russell's shoulder as he walked her to the door. "O.K. O.K.", was all he said.

The teacher needed no more. The night of their "Premiere Performance" she saw Duane's face during the church scene as he, the star, the drug taking tester turned priest, held the sacrament high and faced his clergy, the grade eight class. Heads bowed, they knelt before him to receive the host in the old traditional style.

Duane's face was radiant.

Mrs. Russell needed no more. She looked toward Duane's mother. The mother was crying. Chances are those were the first sweet tears she'd cried in a long time.

The method? Patience, listening, caring, film, creative drama, script writing, patience, listening, organizing, working.

The method? Key Vocabulary

> YOU NEVER WANT TO SAY IT'S GOOD OR BAD. THAT'S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. YOU'VE GOT NO RIGHT AT ALL TO CRITICIZE THE CONTENT OF ANOTHER'S MIND. A CHILD DOESN'T MAKE HIS OWN MIND. IT'S JUST THERE. YOUR JOB IS TO SEE WHAT'S IN IT. YOUR ONLY ALLOWABLE COMMENT IS ONE OF NATURAL INTEREST IN WHAT HE IS WRITING.

(Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 53).

PATH FOUR: HEAD HUNTERS

It had been two years since I'd been in a classroom. A real one, that is. Oh, as a graduate student I had taught a session or two on Romanticism and on expository writing. But that wasn't Teaching teaching. (I hadn't yet learned adults were people too.) So when my

research led me to that middle school classroom in the deep South, I was delighted. Terrified, but delighted. My task was to develop an observation instrument which could determine student cognitive styles according to personality concepts developed by Carl Jung. To validate my instrument I would have students take the MBTI (Myer Briggs Type Indicator), a 166 forced answer questionnaire which indicates Jungian type preference.

Lo and behold my surprise when the grade eights couldn't read the questionnaire. I hadn't counted on that. I asked the teacher if he minded if I try to raise their reading level to enable them to take the MBTI.

"Mind?" he only smiled. "These kids have a vested interest in NOT reading. You're white, Carolyn. They're not! This is the South. It's not Vancouver."

I started out by telling the class I didn't trust their "reading scores." I had wasted enough time testing kids as a therapist-teacher in a home for delinquent girls. Tests only told you what the gal was like in that space and time. A reading test only told you how well a student was able to read that material at that time -- for a myriad of reasons.

I told them I could PROMISE to raise their lowest marks, even if all I did was give them a pre and posttest score. (We had a small lesson in statistics, in moving toward the mean and in becoming test-wise.)

I then went on to "let them in on" my game, to tell them the tricks of my trade-that I use Sylvia Ashton-Warner's methods of organic teaching to teach reading. I started to talk about her. . .

"She developed these ideas to teach Maori children in New Zealand. Miss Ashton-Warner didn't feel that children whose grandfathers had been headhunters would find much meaning in a reading book that said, 'Run, Spot. Jump, Puff'."

I felt the electricity change. I stopped talking. I secretly thanked Mary Budd Rowe for teaching me about wait time. She taught me that when a teacher waits, stops talking for three seconds after a student has answered a question, students will develop a sense of fate control, of ownership in what's going on, they will initiate response themselves, and begin to ask questions rather than either passively listening or responding directly to the teacher's question (Row, 1974).

And sure enough, the questions started.

"Head-hunters?"

"You mean they ate people?"

"How long ago?"

"Do you think the children STILL want to kill white people?"

And there it was. As always. As it had been with Rhonda and Harry and Duane* and....and....

> THE KEY VOCABULARY CENTERS ROUND THE TWO MAIN INSTINCTS, FEAR AND SEX.

(Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 36)

Here we were, a group of black, non-reading children in a Florida school, and I, talking about cannibalism, ritual dances, tribal wars, initiations into manhood. Here we were talking and READING and sharing.

---

*Although the names of these students and their teachers are fictitious, the incidents are real. They all happened as told in this paper.

> BACKWARD READERS HAVE A PRIVATE KEY VOCABULARY WHICH ONCE FOUND LAUNCHES THEM INTO READING.

(Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 36).

I couldn't get them enough books on the subject. Most of the books came from the University of Florida library. None were below the 8th grade level of reading.

The Method? Patience, caring, listening, willingness to let them in on process, having wait-time, not being afraid of reality, willing to risk truth, facing the hate as well as the love. Trusting the idea of:

> "NEGATIVE CAPABILITY," THAT QUALITY WHICH KEATS THOUGHT WAS NECESSARY IN A POET. . . . (HAVING) THE PATIENCE AND WISDOM TO LISTEN, TO WATCH AND WAIT, UNTIL THE INDIVIDUAL CHILD'S 'LINE OF THOUGHT' BECOMES APPARENT. THIS 'LINE' MAY BE CROOKED -- IN ITS FIRST YEARS THE CHILD DEVELOPS A MENTAL COMPLEX OF GUILT AS NATURALLY AS IT INHERITS THE PHYSICAL TRAITS OF ITS PARENTS. BUT THESE UNCONSCIOUS FORCES DETERMINE THE INTENSITY OF ITS INTERESTS, AND LEARNING BECOMES INCOMPARABLY EASIER IF IT IS BUILT ON SUCH A DYNAMIC BASIS -- IN FACT, IT BECOMES PART OF THE UNFOLDING PATTERN OF PERSONALITY.

(Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 12).

METHOD: ORGANIC TEACHING:

Because the organic method of teaching is so natural, one would imagine it to be a method accepted and used by many teachers the world over. Surprisingly not. Most North American educators employ standard texts and curricula such as the "basal reader." Until Teacher was published too few educators had even considered an organic approach to the teaching of reading.

Miss Ashton Warner unfolded her theory of organic teaching in terms of the infant room. The same principles apply to the secondary classroom.

However, the natural miracle of organic teaching occurs even less seldom in the secondary classroom than it does in the primary room. The reason may be found more in fear of taking risks than in lack of awareness.

The essence of the organic method is that it touches those things very deep and real within the child. When the child concerned is an adolescent with learning (most often reading) difficulties, those things very deep and meaningful to him can be quite frightening. So frightening in fact that many teachers dare not become involved with them. Key vocabulary is not meant for such teachers.

As is true in all teaching, teachers can only do that with which they are comfortable. Above all things they must trust that comfort in themselves and work from that base. "When a threshold has been crossed, a teacher loses poise, control and satisfaction. Therefore, it is up to each teacher to know just what her or his own security requires, so as to keep from crossing a crucial threshold" (Wagner, 1976, p. 34).

If the threshold allows this risk, then the ideas of the infant room are easily translated to the secondary classroom.

Assuming risk is allowable, the teacher can utilize those same organic principles found in the infant room: of listening for the key to unlock the unconsciousness; of patient, caring, careful listening; of using the basic instincts so the teacher flows WITH, not against

the children: of using the power of destructiveness and turning it to creativity: of using nature, wind, song, music, dance: of using touch and taste and sound and EVERY natural element available to open doors and broaden experience, to allow one experience to move and flow into another. This is the essence of organic teaching.

A WORD OF WARNING: THERE IS NO METHOD

It is an art, a faith, a happening. It is alive between teacher and student.

> TO THE EXTENT THAT A TEACHER IS AN ARTIST, . . . HIS INNER EYE HAS THE NATIVE POWER, UNATROPHIED, TO HOLD THE WORK HE MEANS TO DO. AND IN THE PLACES WHERE HE CAN'T SEE, HE HAS A TRUST IN HIMSELF THAT HE WILL SEE IT, EITHER IN TIME FOR THE OCCASION OR EVENTUALLY.

(Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 79).

It is no accident that Ashton-Warner uses the word "artist" in her description of the great teacher. Rubins (1981) uses the same language in his description of "Artistry in Teaching." His beliefs about the teacher as artist grow from his interest in: first, developing and nurturing a natural style in teaching that allows the practitioner to exploit particular personality characteristics that are unique to the individual and secondly, counteracting teacher "burn-out", that decline of passion in teaching.

Using the basic principles of organic teaching can only work if it is enhanced by the natural artistry of the teacher. Each individual will use the principles in her own unique way. And thus a "method" goes beyond being a stagnant, a dull, or dead thing.

Rubins draws parallels between the theatre and the classroom.

I attempt a similar comparison using the words of the most recognized master of the stage, Stanislavski: "There is no Stanislavski System. There is only the authentic, incontestable one -- the system of nature itself. Artists who do not go forward go backward."

In order for the artist to go forward he must use nature which is science. "The Stanislavski System is the science of theatre art. As a science it does not stand still; being a science, it has unlimited possibilities for experiment and discoveries" (Moore, 1976).

In adopting organic teaching the teacher must adapt it to his needs, in a way natural to him, complimenting his own unique artistry. To ever accept a "method" as "the" method is to destroy it, is to make it move backward. Teaching can be the greatest of all arts. The greatest of all sciences.

> The sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter the heart, head and hands of educators, and which, by entering in, render the performance of the education function more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before.
>
> (Dewey, 1929, p. 76)

References

Ashton-Warner, S. Teacher. New York: Bantam Books, 1963.

Dewey, J. The source of a science of education. New York: Liverwright, 1929.

Gibbons, M. & Phillips, G. The case for negotiated learning contracts. NASSP Bulletin, December 1979, 63, p. 55-67.

Jezic, B. Transference and counter transference with young people. Presentation given in Zurick, Switzerland, 1980. Available from University of California, Santa Cruz, California.

Moore, S. The Stanislavski system. New York: Penguin, 1976.

Pfeiffer, J. and Jones, J. Structured experiences for human relations training, Vol. II. La Jolla, California: University Assoc., 1974.

Rogers, C. Freedom to learn. Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1969.

Rogers, C. A way of being. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980.

Rowe, M.B. Wait-time and rewards as instructional variables, their influence on language, logic, and fate-control; Part one - Wait time. Journal of Research in Science Teaching. Vol. II, No. 2, 1974, p. 81-94.

Rubins, L. Artistry in teaching. Presentation addressed to Simon Fraser University, February 1981.

Wagner, B.J. Dorothy Heathcote drama as a learning medium. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association of the U.S., 1976.

Wasserman, S. Becoming a teacher (not yet in print), 1981

Way, B. Development through drama. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1967.