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ABSTRACT

For better or worse, administrators observing classroom teaching is a leadership priority in many American schools. In a whole language environment, a variety of activities are usually occurring simultaneously. Goals are therefore needed to provide instructional direction and to clarify for observers, the teacher, and students why the students are doing what they are doing. The students and the teacher who are immersed in a whole language perspective are constantly negotiating and sharing the learning-teaching process. Whole language teachers' definition of classroom structure is usually flexible, and often subtle, but it nonetheless is an influential force affecting their students' literacy learning. Organizational approaches such as whole-class instruction, strategy groups, and individual or small-group research activities represent a blending of direct instruction and immersion. Those observing whole language classrooms should be aware that organization is demonstrated in a variety of ways to support students' literacy learning across the curriculum. When observing activities involving classroom libraries, observers should be prepared for a flexible structure involving student mobility, immersion, discussion, and productive noise. Observers should also be prepared for a diversity of writing immersion and should compliment teachers for their flexible efforts. Whether students are writing, reading, talking, or listening, the emphasis is on interactive, meaning-focused learning. Teachers and administrators should realize that the whole language perspective takes time. It is especially effective when students sense that teachers truly value what they can do and care about them as "whole" people. (RS)

What to look for in whole language content area classrooms

Dr. Joseph Sanacore

For better or for worse, administrators observing classroom teaching is a leadership priority in many American schools. Since this practice will probably remain--at least in the immediate future--we should support it as a positive vehicle for improving instruction. Of major importance are administrators and teachers working cooperatively to give students opportunities for communicating effectively in content area classrooms. This thrust, however, might appear messy, especially if teachers and their students are immersed in a whole language philosophy. For example, they might be working in a clutter of "real" books, authentic papers, and productive noise. Although this clutter is more difficult to discern than direct instruction, it nonetheless has the potential for enhancing our students' literacy learning and for promoting a lifelong love of reading and writing.

What follows are suggestions that may be helpful for administrators when they observe content area classrooms with a whole language thrust. These suggestions may also be useful for teachers who are invited to observe a colleague's lesson and to provide him or her with constructive feedback. Finally, teachers may find these guidelines worthwhile as they reflect on the daily dynamics of their classroom lessons.

Instructional goals

In a whole language environment, a variety of activities are usually occurring simultaneously. Goals are therefore needed

to provide instructional direction and to clarify why our students are doing what they are doing. Thus, as part of a social studies unit on World War 11, a small group of students may be reading and discussing Bette Greene's **Summer of My German Soldier**, while another group may be immersed in Corrie ten Boom's **The Hiding Place**. Meanwhile, individuals could be exploring their portfolios as they attempt to make a decision about which working paper concerning the War will be revised and submitted. During these activities, the social studies teacher is probably visiting the groups to provide support and meeting with individuals to help them revise their papers.

From the perspective of an observer, these activities are more difficult to discern than a conventional lesson involving a whole class discussion of a textbook chapter. Goals therefore should be established so that the observer, teacher, and students have a clear sense of direction during the instructional block of time. Examples include: "to read and discuss one of two books about World War 11 so that a deeper and personalized awareness of the War is developed" and "to decide which WW 11 paper will be revised and submitted and then to make the appropriate revisions." When these goals are placed on the chalkboard, the content area lesson represents more clarity, structure, and credibility. Afterward, both teacher and administrator can engage in a post-observation conference to elaborate on important aspects of the lesson. Here, the teacher could highlight the goals and related activities in benefiting students' immediate literacy learning and in

supporting the lifetime reading and writing habit.

Sharing the learning-teaching process

Although goals provide an instructional focus, they should not dictate classroom activities. The students and teacher who are immersed in a whole language perspective are constantly negotiating and sharing the learning-teaching process. Moving in this direction, however, means giving up control; thus, the teacher's traditional role of directing the classroom changes to a cooperative, democratic role where the students and teacher are colearners. In her classic work **Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12** (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), Regie Routman indicates that this transition from being in control to giving up control is not easy. Realistically, this growth process can be unsettling at first, as the teacher gradually moves from allowing students to speak only when they have raised their hands and have been called upon to encouraging students to freely express their ideas and opinions. This type of growth also translates into a classroom environment where students no longer direct all comments to the teacher; instead, students feel like a community of learners as they make choices and respond to one another and to the teacher. This transition, of course, is difficult and takes time, especially for secondary school teachers who are accustomed to lecturing and dispensing information in their content area classrooms. Routman believes that part of the process of giving up control is to relinquish

the traditional, transmission model which considers the teacher to be the source of all knowledge; she prefers that the teacher adjust to the collaborative, interactive model which encourages greater participation among students.

As with any change involving teachers, administrators need to be sensitive and supportive. During classroom observations, the principal should become a colearner with the teacher and the students as a sense of community emerges. Specifically, the administrator compliments the content area teacher for being flexible and praises students for accepting greater responsibility in making choices. Since secondary-level educators are concerned about appropriate discipline in the classroom, they should not confuse productive noise and student decision-making as an erosion of good discipline; rather, they should embrace this innovative structure as a way of encouraging self-discipline and of promoting immediate and lifetime learning. This positive momentum is gradual and represents significant risk-taking, with consequential successes and failures. Teachers therefore need continued encouragement during subsequent observations--both formal and informal--so that they maintain the appropriate energy level for sharing the learning-teaching process.

Classroom organization

This notion of sharing is vital for a successful content area classroom that is nurtured by a whole language perspective.

Through sharing, trust is established because our students realize that their contributions are valued.

The foundation is now set for continued growth, and a major part of this growth involves organizing instruction in a heterogeneous setting. Organization is essential because it supports our efforts to manage instruction effectively while it helps dispel the myth that whole language educators are laissez faire, unstructured, and insensitive to the importance of skill and strategy development.

Although this myth is still being perpetuated, nothing could be further from the truth. The whole language teachers I have observed during the past ten years have given substantial time and energy to planning and carrying out effective classroom instruction. Their definition of structure is usually flexible, and often subtle, but it nonetheless is an influential force affecting their students' literacy learning.

Not surprisingly, whole language enthusiasts have a broad repertoire of approaches for organizing instruction. These include individual conferences, research groups, sharing meetings, shared reading, strategy groups, skill groups, and whole-class techniques. Flexible patterns, such as these, are useful for helping students fulfill content area requirements. As important, they provide learners with opportunities to work cooperatively with others in a supportive environment as they increase the chances of students actually enjoying subject matter.

Recently, I observed a heterogeneous biology class for

three weeks. The unit of study was food processing, and the teacher used a biology textbook to provide an informational base. Initially, she organized students with whole-class instruction for the purpose of introducing them to Francis Robinson's SQ3R study strategy (**Effective Reading**, New York: Harper & Row, 1962). She effectively used an overhead projector to elaborate on the steps of this strategy (survey, question, read, recite, review) as she demonstrated an application of the strategy to parts of the textbook chapter which appeared on a transparency.

During the next several days, the teacher reorganized the class into flexible strategy groups (not ability groups) and motivated them to apply SQ3R to the rest of the textbook chapter. Meanwhile, she visited each group and provided guidance. For example, she reinforced the application of the study strategy to sections of the chapter concerning the acquisition of food, the breakdown of food into nutrients, and other areas. At times, she "thought aloud" while she surveyed the entire chapter and made tentative decisions about how to read it, questioned the subheadings, read the related text, recited important ideas and facts, and reviewed the entire chapter. This support helped the strategy groups to realize that application of SQ3R to their textbook chapter can lead to better understanding and retention of pertinent information concerning food processing.

Although the biology textbook provided an informational base, the teacher was aware of its limitations. She therefore

gave students options to do individual or small-group research projects concerning such topics as developing a model of the digestive system for the human, paramecium, hydra, or another organism; exploring careers in science, medicine, nursing, dietetics, or another related field; determining the relationship between diet and exercise; or pursuing another area of interest. To facilitate the completion of these projects, the students did research in the Library Media Center, and the biology teacher and library media specialist provided assistance and pertinent resources. The resources included manuals, paperbacks, pamphlets, textbooks, magazines, reference books, scientific journals, and other materials. When the projects were completed, both the teacher and students cooperatively assessed their worth.

These organizational approaches--whole-class instruction, strategy groups, and individual or small-group research activities--represented a blending of direct instruction and immersion as students respectively were taught a study strategy, were given opportunities to apply it to their textbook chapter, and were encouraged to make choices (and were respected for making choices) concerning their research projects. This carefully planned synthesis represented positive structure while it supported ownership and self-esteem in learning. Thus, students not only attained immediate success but also increased their potential for developing a lifelong desire to pursue scientific interests. Those observing whole language classrooms should be aware that organization is demonstrated in a variety

of ways to support students' literacy learning across the curriculum.

Classroom library

Complementing organizational efforts is a well-designed classroom library that supports independent reading and simultaneously fosters the lifetime reading habit. Typically, students are given opportunities to browse the materials, to decide what they want to read, to immerse themselves in their selections, and to share these experiences with peers and the teacher.

At times, these experiences are linked to an instructional topic, theme, or unit. Thus, in English, the focus might be good and evil or belonging and alienation, while in social studies, the curriculum might stress the maturing of colonial society or the politics of revolutionary America. In science, the instructional emphasis might be natural disasters, natural habitats, or saving the planet through recycling. The classroom library therefore becomes a major source of support for content area learning.

When observing this type of setting, be prepared for a flexible structure involving student mobility, immersion, discussion, and productive noise. Administrators can be especially supportive by reaffirming the value of this flexibility as well as the classroom library that nurtures it. Principals and supervisors can also help teachers enhance their

libraries by securing at least four to eight resources per student. A wide variety of reading levels, interest levels, genres, and formats should be represented (e.g., fiction and nonfiction paperbacks, poetry anthologies, chapter books, magazines, and newspapers). In addition, students are more likely to use the classroom library during independent reading if the materials are highly visible and attractive. Educational leaders who provide these accommodations reinforce the importance of classroom libraries as vehicles for enriching learning across the curriculum. (More valuable information about designing excellent classroom libraries appears in Jann Sorrell Fractor, Marjorie Ciruti Woodruff, Miriam G. Martinez, and William H. Teal's article in the March 1993 issue of **The Reading Teacher.**)

Writing

Well-designed classroom libraries have the potential not only to promote a diversity of reading but also to foster a diversity of writing. When reading narrative, expository, descriptive, and poetic texts, students have opportunities to internalize these discourse types including their ideas and themes, organizational patterns, language usage, and other writing conventions. Thus, with narration, students experience story grammar (or story structure) consisting of a leading character, a problem, a goal, activities to solve the problem, obstacles, outcomes, and a theme or moral. By contrast, with exposition, learners encounter an informational structure represented by

an introduction, subheadings, charts, maps, graphs, captions, a summary, and sometimes discussion questions. Although the authentic world of text might vary from these descriptions, the point to be made here is that students need to internalize a variety of discourse as readers so they can generate a diversity of text as writers.

With such an implicit understanding of the genres, students are more likely to benefit from their immersion in content area writing. Not surprisingly, some topics for writing are given by the teacher while others are selected by the students. For example, during a ten-week progress period, learners may be exposed to several units of study in social studies, including the preindustrial republic and society in the early republic. For the first unit, the teacher may direct a miniresearch/writing activity, expecting students to probe important aspects of the preindustrial economy. Conversely, for the second unit, students may explore their portfolios to review notes and working papers on the topic and may write about aspects of the topic that they found interesting. Individuals could fulfill this writing requirement by submitting a collection of poems, journal entries, an essay, a story, an editorial, or a miniresearch paper. During these teacher-directed and student-selected activities, support is provided through whole-class instruction, small-group interaction, and individual conferences. Those observing whole language content area classrooms should be prepared for this diversity of writing immersion and should compliment teachers for their flexible efforts.

Importance of meaning

Whether students are writing, reading, talking, or listening, the emphasis is on interactive, meaning-focused learning. This approach does not negate the importance of spelling, vocabulary, and other skills; instead, skills are linked to meaningful contexts to enhance understanding.

For example, while being immersed in Harper Lee's **To Kill a Mockingbird**, students might reveal a need to discuss in more detail a related concept, such as prejudice. To help them connect the concept with parts of the novel, the teacher might apply the discussion to a structured overview, semantic mapping, semantic feature analysis, PReP, or another strategy for activating their prior knowledge. Afterward, the students could be challenged to make predictions and to confirm or disconfirm their predictions during reading. To further support their understanding of the text, the students could be given opportunities to apply the QARs strategy (Question-Answer Relationships) so that they can locate information needed for comprehending at different response levels. These levels involve **textually explicit** questions that can lead to answers found directly in the text; **textually implicit** questions that motivate students to think more deeply about the information as they search the text for answers; and **schema-based** questions that require learners to focus on their background knowledge and experience when they seek responses. Although the QARs strategy can increase students' understanding of text at different levels,

an observer should not assume that the response levels represent a hierarchical relationship. This process is simply intended to help readers interact with text in the context of pursuing information and making connections. Supporting QARs as well as other approaches with similar intent helps students to use skills and strategies not as ends in themselves but rather as ways of constructing meaning in a variety of important contexts across the curriculum. This type of support promotes effective reading and while it establishes a foundation for independent reading. More information about QARs is found in P. David Pearson and Dale Johnson's **Teaching Reading Comprehension** (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1978); in Taffy Raphael's "Question-Answering Strategies for Children" (**The Reading Teacher**, November 1982); and in Richard Vacca and Jo Anne Vacca's **Content Area Reading** (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989).

What to look for in retrospect

Establishing instructional goals, sharing the learning-teaching process, organizing instruction, using the classroom library to promote independent reading, supporting a diversity of writing immersion, and focusing on meaning are only a few of the qualities that can be observed in whole language classrooms. This instructional emphasis provides students with positive learning experiences while it increases their potential for lifetime literacy.

Within the space limitations of this column, other important considerations have not been highlighted. These include reading aloud a variety of discourse types, demonstrating or modeling aspects of the reading and writing processes, giving all students many opportunities to engage in meaningful talk, focusing on the importance of metacognitive awareness during reading and writing, motivating learners to use the writing center, and evaluating students' literacy learning through observations, anecdotal records, running records, checklists, and other informal strategies. These and similar considerations are certainly embraced in whole language instruction across the curriculum.

Teachers and administrators should realize, however, that this perspective takes time and that it is especially effective when students sense we truly value what they can do and we genuinely care about them as "whole" people. This is the ultimate foundation for success in literacy learning.