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Transformative teaching in a developmental reading program

As educators we talk a great deal about theory to practice, and we hope our candidates will understand and make the connections needed in order to apply their theory to practice. Often though, we do not spend enough time helping our candidates discover what their own theory base is and thus that theory to practice (praxis) connection gets broken. One of the ongoing assignments for our graduate program in reading requires students to write and then revisit and rewrite their literacy philosophy. The majority of our students are classroom teachers at the PreK through 12th grade level. Most teach a variety of subjects requiring a lot of reading and writing. However, a growing number of students working with developing readers at the college level are entering our program. As they do, they bring with them different challenges—challenges for them and for us as we work to make the curriculum relevant to the differing literacy instructional needs of our candidates. The following literacy philosophy exemplifies the journey we must all take as we move from seeing ourselves as teachers to teacher-learners, and reveal the necessary reflection required to truly allow our theory to inform our practice.

Imagine a teacher who thinks and acts as if she is the fount of knowledge. To use a familiar phrase, she is a model knower. This teacher's strongest intelligence is linguistic, and she uses this as her dominant teaching and learning style. Imagine how much notebook paper and pencils her students use taking notes and how the classroom discussion is organized, controlled, and teacher-centered.

This teacher's philosophy of teaching and learning is known as the transmitter of knowledge model: "In a metaphorical sense, the teacher looks over all the knowledge…digests everything and takes some of it

to school, where it will be disseminated" (Sprinthall, Sprinthall, & Oja, 1998, p. 353). Freire (2000) describes this teaching style as the banking concept of education, "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat" (p. 72).

Transformative Evolution Towards a Philosophy of Literacy

Fortunately for my students and myself, my philosophy of teaching and learning has evolved into a more participative approach, and I can no longer separate my philosophy of teaching from my philosophy of literacy. This evolution began shortly after I became chair of the Education Department and started teaching College Reading. Some of the department faculty were tired of teaching this course, which is designed for incoming freshmen who do not meet the minimum score on the Nelson Denny Reading Test and who need remediation with comprehension skills and vocabulary development. How difficult a course could this be to teach? Besides, I always excelled in reading, even in elementary school, and vocabulary would be easy to teach, too.

My first course went alright. It was a small class and overall my students did fine. We read lots of short stories (that I selected), and my students took vocabulary quizzes each week. I lectured on the aspects of good readers—before, during, and after reading—and my students took notes.

As the semesters continued, I began to see that something was not working with this particular group of students, and, yet, I continued with the transmitter of knowledge model of teaching. My white, middle-class values were being violated on a daily basis. I heard chaos and chatter as my students discussed the assignments. Also, my students found the short stories irrelevant and boring. How could this be? They were reading such great authors as Arthur Conan Doyle, Eudora Welty, Jack London, and Agatha Christie. What was wrong with these students? It was within this context that my philosophy of literacy began to evolve. This evolution involves learning, relearning, and unlearning on a regular basis, as my philosophy of literacy develops.

I am ashamed to admit that throughout my teaching career, I have paid lip service to one of the basic principles of teaching, and this is to start where the learner is and take into account his or her background. According to Delpit (1995), "We carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we teach the world of others when we don't even know they exist"

(p. xiv)? My first task required defining my world and the world of my students. The majority of my students are African American, mostly male, adolescents, athletes, and first-generation college students. I also have a lot of international students, both male and female. All of my students are literate, and I often wonder how they were taught to read and what it was like in their classrooms as elementary, middle, and high school students. The majority of my students are aliterate, meaning they know how to read but have chosen not to read or read just enough to get by. Why did they become aliterate? What factors contributed to this? Part of my job is to do catch up work with them and to create a love for reading.

The diversity of my students has helped me the most in terms of shaping my philosophy of literacy. In one of my courses, I was a minority in my own classroom for the first time when I taught 16 African American students. My students' oral tradition was very evident from the beginning. From my white, middle-class perspective, all I heard was chaos, chatter, and irrelevant comments. This was a difficult lesson to learn, but what my students taught me was they were processing the information. When I stood back and really listened and observed at a deeper level, I realized that the oral tradition was part of how they processed information. Also, I realized that their comments were being shaped by each other. As a result, I began to embrace one of Delpit's (1995) principles that as educators "we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness" (p. 47).

I now believe that learning happens best when I use a variety of teaching methods instead of relying on lecturing and the teacher-centered approach. I am not a fount of knowledge, and my students are not depositories waiting to be filled by me. I have shifted from a model knower to a teacher-learner. I agree with Routman (2000) that "being able to listen, question, explore, and discover are more important than having all the right answers" (p. 2). If one comes into my classroom today, one would hear me thinking aloud to my students: "Here is where I became confused in the story because I wasn't sure why this character was placed in the story." My students love to hear that I, too, can be confused, and it helps them sort out the story as well.

I began to see the importance of social interaction among my students. I now believe that students need opportunities, on a daily basis, to express their ideas and thoughts to each other (Vygotsky would be proud). As I loosened the reins of control and encouraged social interaction, I was amazed at how much my students were impacting each other's thought processes. Research supports the use of social interaction and collabora-

tion in the classroom. One of Routman's applications of social learning is the use of literature conversations: "Literature conversations—where students talk together in small, self-sustaining groups, listen actively and respectfully to each other, develop new understandings, and uncover layers of meaning—are a major shift from the teacher in control doing most of the talking and setting the agenda and outcome for discussion" (p. 176). I am using literature conversations in my college reading classroom, and it is a work in progress, as I help my students develop the skills of active listening and engaging the text.

I believe that learning happens best when students can relate classroom experiences to real-world applications, and, even more importantly, to their own lives. I think it is important that students are placed in authentic and meaningful learning experiences; otherwise, as Whitehead (1929) states, knowledge becomes inert or mentally inactive: "Theoretical ideas should always find important applications within the pupil's curriculum" (p. 5).

Even though the majority of my students are African American males, I also have females and males of other ethnicities. In order to embrace diversity and have meaningful texts for all of my students, students are self-selecting the books they want to read. As Wink (2005) and many other educators have found, choice matters, and it is a way of having students take control of their own learning. This semester, one of the vocabulary words was "score," which means twenty. I asked the students if they remembered the speech that began with "Fourscore and seven years ago." Many of them had, and immediately one of my students changed his voice and pretended to be making a speech. One of my students said, "Why don't we do speeches in here?" I was elated, but I almost lapsed into control mode and wanted to assign the speeches to be researched and read in class. Instead, I remembered my philosophy of literacy and quickly asked, "Why don't you pick one that you are interested in?" I was amazed at their choices. Listed are some examples: (a) speech by Kofi Annan after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001, (b) *Never Give In* by Winston Churchill, (c) *I Have a Dream* by Martin Luther King, (d) *Gettysburg Address* by Abraham Lincoln, (e) *The Ballot or the Bullet* by Malcolm X, and (f) *All Eyez on Me* by Tupac. This list, as well as the types of books selected, is reflective of my students' worlds and backgrounds. Self-selection is a way to honor them and foster the love for reading and learning.

One belief that hasn't changed is the belief that all students must be valued and respected. I believe in developing relationships with my students and getting to know them. I believe in the Hippocratic Oath, *Do No Harm*. Respect for students and creating a safe and predictable

learning environment are critical, as noted by Cambourne (1995), Mathewson (1994), and Rosenblatt (1978). The affective dimension can not be minimized—especially regarding literacy. My students sometimes stumble over words and work hard to pronounce words correctly, but they know that they are safe in my classroom. As noted by Mathewson (1994), the affective issues such as a student's feelings about reading, feelings about him-or herself, interest levels, and general emotional states will determine whether or not the student makes the decision to engage in the reading process.

In conclusion, my philosophy of literacy is a work in progress, and I am confident that it will continue to evolve. I have had to learn new ways of teaching, unlearn methods that I thought were effective, and examine my previous beliefs about teaching. I am not the fount of knowledge. I have never been one, and now I don't want to be one, even if I could. My students are my teachers. I would be remiss if I did not provide credit to my graduate program. I am learning about literacy in ways I have never learned before. I am a teacher of reading, regardless of the content area. I am first and foremost a teacher of reading.

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